



FACULTY OF ECONOMICS  
AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

**Consumer Ethics:**  
**The Role of Personality, Intuition, and Hypocrisy**

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**2012**

**Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Ghent  
University, in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor in Applied  
Economic Sciences**

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## **Dankwoord - Acknowledgements**

---

Ook al lijkt een doctoraat schrijven op het eerste zicht een individueel gebeuren, toch kan je een dergelijk iets niet realiseren zonder de steun van heel wat mensen. Daarom maak ik graag van deze gelegenheid gebruik om een aantal mensen in het bijzonder te bedanken.

In eerste instantie wens ik een woord van dank te richten aan mijn promotor Patrick Van Kenhove. Patrick, je hebt me uiteraard de kans gegeven om van start te kunnen gaan als doctoraatsstudent. Maar meer nog dan dat, wil ik je bedanken omdat je me altijd met raad en daad bijstond wanneer ik er nood aan had. Je was en bent nog steeds altijd positief ingesteld, en bovendien liet je me ook steeds de volledige vrijheid wanneer het aankwam op het kiezen en uitpluizen van onderzoekstopics. Verder heb je me ook gestimuleerd om er op uit te trekken naar het buitenland en een meeting te plannen met Scott Vitell in de University of Mississippi. Deze reis heeft me heel wat bijgeleerd op verschillende vlakken, maar ik ben er zeker van dat ik deze niet had ondernomen zonder jouw advies en steun. Tot slot vind ik het fantastisch hoe je er in slaagt om het werkklimaat en de algemene sfeer binnen de vakgroep steeds optimaal te houden.

Ook aan de andere leden van mijn begeleidingscommissie wil ik een woord van dank richten. Iris, jou wil ik bedanken voor de zeer vlotte samenwerking bij de studies die we samen uitvoer(d)en. Je bemerkingen en suggesties waren steeds waardevol. Daarnaast hadden we ook leuke babbels en wenste je me altijd het beste toe. Maggie, ook jou wil ik bedanken omdat je steeds met iedereen, en dus ook met mij, begaan was. Je vroeg regelmatig hoe het met me was, en straalt steeds heel wat positivisme uit. Ik wil je ook hartelijk bedanken voor de zeer nuttige en kritische inzichten met betrekking tot mijn doctoraat.

Ik neem ook graag van deze gelegenheid gebruik om de andere leden van mijn doctoraatsjury te bedanken. Patrick De Pelsmacker, Wim Janssens, en Scott Vitell, hartelijk bedankt voor alle kritische en nuttige inzichten, vragen, en bemerkingen die jullie met me deelden tijdens de interne verdediging. Ik heb er heel wat van opgestoken en het heeft de finale versie van mijn doctoraat ongetwijfeld een meerwaarde gegeven. Scott, I would also like to thank you that you were willing to welcome me at your department. It was nice talking to you about research ideas as well as more

general stuff. You were always showing interest in my research and made my time in Oxford very enjoyable. You're a warm person and certainly an inspiration for people like me who are interested in topics situated in the consumer ethics domain.

Mario, ook jou wil ik heel graag bedanken. Ik kan niet anders dan bewondering te uiten omwille van de enorme boost die je voor de vakgroep betekende. Door met jou samen te werken in het kader van onze 'fluency' paper, heb ik echt wel geleerd dat het de moeite loont om geduld uit te oefenen bij het uitvoeren en uitschrijven van een studie. In het kader van onder meer dit gemeenschappelijke onderzoek heb ik echt geleerd wat het is om goed onderzoek te voeren, en hoe belangrijk het wel niet is om op een bedachtzame en gestructureerde manier aan een onderzoek en bijhorende paper te werken.

En dan zijn er natuurlijk ook mijn vroegere collega's van de vakgroep Marketing aan de Universiteit Gent. Ik zou jullie stuk voor stuk willen bedanken voor de aangename samenwerking en leuke babbels. Het was heel leuk om jullie te leren kennen. Ik wens jullie uit de grond van mijn hart heel veel succes in alles wat jullie doen, of het nu op academisch of persoonlijk vlak is. Een aantal mensen had ik graag in het bijzonder bedankt. Hendrik, ook al ben je van mening dat het bureau belangrijker is dan de mensen in dat bureau (knipoog), moet ik toch toegeven dat het steeds goed vertoeven was met jou. We gaven wel al eens steekjes onder water, maar dat maakte het werken des te aangenamer. Je bent altijd heel rustig en vooral optimistisch, een ideale tegenhanger dus voor iemand zoals ik die vaak wat onrustig is en het soms iets minder rooskleurig durft in te zien. Ook mijn andere bureaugenootjes waren uiteraard super. Bedankt voor de leuke tijd samen.

Sofie, samen met jou startte ik m'n avontuur op de vakgroep Marketing. Wat was ik blij dat ik je al eerder kende en dat je ons verwoegde op de vakgroep. Ik keek altijd naar je op wanneer ik je weer hard werkend tegenkwam achter een hele berg artikels die je nog moest doorworstelen voor één van je studies. Daarnaast ben je uiteraard ook een goede vriendin geworden, net als alle andere vroegere studiegenootjes van onze Gent-bende die ik hierbij ook wil bedanken voor alle leuke afspraakjes die we op regelmatige basis planden en nog steeds plannen. Sofie, ik wens je heel veel succes toe met de trouw en je toekomst met Bert.

Bart, als ik de trein nam vanuit Dendermonde naar Gent-Sint-Pieters dan kon de rit al eens te lang duren naar m'n zin. Dit plaatje veranderde compleet wanneer ik jou tegemoetkwam op het perron in Dendermonde. De tijd vloog voorbij. We babbelden heel wat af, over van alles en nog wat. Of het nu om persoonlijke of werkgerelateerde zaken ging, je was altijd enorm behulpzaam en aanmoedigend. Hartelijk bedankt hiervoor! Ook nog eens een dikke proficiat met jullie gezinnetje en de nieuwe thuis.

Anneleen, ik weet niet of het ligt aan het feit dat we beiden afkomstig zijn uit het land van Waas, maar we zaten toch al vrij snel op dezelfde golflengte. Ik bewonder je kwaliteiten als onderzoekster. De academische wereld mag zichzelf gelukkig prijzen met iemand van jouw kaliber. Daarnaast konden en kunnen we het ook buiten het werkgerelateerde altijd goed met mekaar vinden. Hopelijk houden we nog contact in de toekomst, maar met de verschillende ladies nights in het verschiet, heb ik er alvast een goed oog in.

Karin, uiteraard kan dit dankwoord niet zonder een woord van dank voor jou. Als je van organisatietalent spreekt, dan komt Karin al gauw in je top of mind te zitten. Je slaagde er altijd in om iedereen op z'n wenken te bedienen, en deed dit steeds met de glimlach. Ongelooflijk hoeveel 'drive' er in één persoon kan zitten! Ze zeggen wel al eens: "niemand is onmisbaar", maar ik twijfel ten zeerste of dat in jouw geval ook zo is. Bedankt voor alle hulp en steun doorheen mijn jaren aan de vakgroep.

Ook mijn kersverse collega's van de Hogeschool-Universiteit Brussel wil ik vermelden in dit dankwoord. Al van dag één voelde ik me op m'n gemak op de vijfde verdieping van het Serclaes-gebouw en ik ben er vrij zeker van dat dit gevoel er altijd zal blijven. Stuk voor stuk wensten jullie me veel succes met m'n doctoraat en toonden jullie oprecht interesse in mijn doen en laten.

Uiteraard ook een grote dankjewel aan mijn papa, mama, zus, broer, toekomstige schoonzussen-, -ouders, en –broer. En tot slot ook een welgemeend woord van dank aan Gijs. Ik verwittigde je steeds op voorhand dat ik in de periode December 2011 – April 2012 niet te genieten zou zijn. Ook al was dit waarschijnlijk vaak het geval, toch ontkende je dit steeds in alle talen. Dus bedankt voor al je geduld en vooral al je geruststellende woordjes. Het zit echt heel goed tussen ons,

dus ik hoop (maar ben er zeker van) dat we samen de toekomst tegemoet kunnen. Ik kijk er alvast heel erg naar uit om samen met jou binnenkort een thuis te delen.

Tine De Bock

April, 2012



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## Dutch Summary

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Het idee van de consument die zich als een goede burger in de marktomgeving begeeft (bv. Ringberg, Odekerken-Schröder, & Christensen, 2007) staat in schril contrast met de vele studies die wijzen op de alomtegenwoordigheid van onethische consumentenpraktijken (Reynolds & Harris, 2006). Denk maar aan winkeldiefstal, niets zeggen wanneer men teveel geld terugkrijgt aan de kassa, of het illegaal downloaden van muziek. Negatief consumentengedrag is niet eigen aan een ‘crimineel segment’ binnen onze maatschappij, maar is typisch voor de consument in het algemeen (Bazerman & Banaji, 2004; Harris & Reynolds, 2004). Dit wijdverspreid wangedrag onder consumenten heeft verregaande gevolgen voor de bedrijfswereld, andere consumenten, en de maatschappij in het algemeen (Fullerton & Punj, 2004).

Binnen marketingethiek zijn studies die zich focussen op businessethiek (d.i., studies die de aanvaardbaarheid of onaanvaardbaarheid van businesspraktijken onderzoeken; Ferrell, Fraedrich, & Ferrell, 2008) relatief wijdverspreid. Echter, onderzoek dat gericht is op consumentenethiek (d.i., onderzoek dat zich toelegt op de aanvaardbaarheid of onaanvaardbaarheid van consumentenpraktijken; Dodge, Edwards, & Fullerton, 1996) is minder aanwezig in dit domein (Neale & Fullerton, 2010). Nochtans maakt een beter inzicht in consumentenethiek het mogelijk om de gangbaarheid alsook de diepgaande impact van wanpraktijken bij consumenten in te perken (Vitell, 2003). Het doel van dit proefschrift is dan ook om bij te dragen tot de bestaande kennis aangaande consumentenethiek. Meer bepaald omvat dit proefschrift, naast de algemene inleiding (d.i., *Hoofdstuk 1*) en de algemene discussie (d.i., *Hoofdstuk 6*), 4 hoofdstukken die zich toespitsen op 3 specifieke onderzoekstopics.

In eerste instantie focust mijn doctoraal onderzoek zich op de invloed van persoonlijkheid op ethische percepties bij consumenten (d.i., hun oordeel over allerlei onethische consumentenpraktijken). Ondanks de erkenning van de algemene relevantie van persoonlijkheidskarakteristieken voor ethische beslissingen bij consumenten, is er meer onderzoek vereist dat de impact van *specifieke* persoonlijkheidskarakteristieken voor consumentenethiek nagaat (Vitell, 2003). *Hoofdstuk 2* onderzoekt meer bepaald de rol van zelf-regulatieve focus op ethische overtuigingen bij consumenten.

Ten tweede legt dit proefschrift zich toe op de rol van intuïtieve gevoelens in het morele beslissingsdomein. Traditioneel wordt ethische beslissingsvorming beschouwd als een resultaat van rationele processen (bv. Kohlberg, 1976). Meer recent onderzoek daarentegen schrijft een belangrijke rol toe aan intuïtie binnen het morele domein en roept op tot meer onderzoek aangaande dit onderwerp (bv. Haidt, 2001). In *Hoofdstuk 3* bestudeer ik de rol van ‘affective priming’ en ‘conceptual fluency’, een specifieke vorm van metacognitieve ervaringen, in morele oordelen van individuen.

Ten derde, heel wat studies focussen zich op de heersende percepties over negatieve businesspraktijken. In veel mindere mate worden ook de percepties over negatieve consumentenpraktijken bestudeerd. Echter, studies die zich toeleggen op de vergelijking van deze twee percepties zijn schaars. Nochtans toont eerder onderzoek aan dat individuen geneigd zijn om onethische businesspraktijken veel strenger te beoordelen dan identieke consumentenpraktijken (bv. DePaulo, 1985, 1987; Vermeir & Van Kenhove, 2008). Dit fenomeen wordt ook wel bestempeld als dubbele standaarden, een specifiek voorbeeld van zogenaamde morele hypocrisie. *Hoofdstuk 4* en *5* spitsen zich toe op dit fenomeen.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

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*The perception that all customers behave ethically may not be much more than wishful thinking.*

—Wirtz & Kum (2004, p. 159).

The idea that consumers act in functional and good-mannered ways (e.g., Ringberg, Odekerken-Schröder, & Christensen, 2007) has been widely contradicted by research pointing to the prevalence of consumer misbehavior<sup>1</sup> (defined as “behavioral acts by consumers which violate the generally accepted norms of conduct in consumption situations, and thus disrupt the consumption order,” Fullerton & Punj, 2004, p. 1239; see also Reynolds & Harris, 2006). Questionable consumer behavior is not a segregated exception but rather is typical of consumers overall (Bazerman & Banaji, 2004; Harris & Reynolds, 2004). Consider, for example, one form of misbehavior: Shoplifters represent all socio-economic and demographic groups (Alberstat, 1989), which means retail theft is not restricted to a small criminal subculture but rather represents consumers in general (Dawson, 1993). Studies estimate that as many as 60 percent of consumers have shoplifted at least once in their lifetimes (Klemke, 1992). Recent research indicates the prevalence of other consumer misbehaviors as well. The Global Software Piracy Study 2010 by the Business Software Alliance indicates that half of the 116 geographical areas studied reported piracy rates of 62 percent or higher, and in two-thirds of them, one software program was pirated for every one that was installed legally.

Business suffers badly from such consumer misbehavior. For example, the Global Retail Theft Barometer 2011 published by the Centre for Retail Research identifies customer theft as still the most important contributor to retail shrinkage, accounting for 43.2 percent of the total, or \$51.5 billion. Such daily misconduct forces retailers to face the increasing costs of (replacing) lost merchandise, while also instituting expensive measures associated with prevention, detection, and prosecution (Yaniv, 2009). These extra costs have significant roles in many retail failures (Cole, 1989). Questionable consumer practices have other profound impacts as well; a 2010 report by Tera Consultants (*Building a Digital Economy: The Importance of Saving Jobs in the EU's Creative Industries*) estimated 345,000 job losses in Europe between 2008 and 2010 due to piracy in the film,

music, software, and television industries. If digital piracy cannot be reduced, the European Union could witness a cumulative loss of 1.2 million jobs in creative industries by 2015, in line with the potential for more than €240 billion in lost retail revenues over that period. Even consumers are negatively influenced by other consumers' unethical behaviors (Fullerton & Punj, 2004). For example, stores often make up for shrinkage losses with higher prices, which means honest customers share in the costs of shoplifting (Tonglet, 2002). Specifically, retail crime costs families in 43 countries surveyed by the Global Retail Theft Barometer 2011 an average of €149 extra on their annual shopping bills.

All this evidence combines to reveal that consumer misbehavior is not a rare event but rather constitutes a daily practice, with far-reaching consequences for the business world, consumers, and society in general (Fullerton & Punj, 2004). Studies focused on ethical transgressions by businesses are relatively widespread, but the body of work on consumer transgressions is far less abundant (Neale & Fullerton, 2010). Yet a better understanding of consumer ethics (i.e., questions concerning the acceptability or unacceptability of actions by the consumer; Dodge, Edwards, & Fullerton, 1996) might help reduce the prevalence and profound impact of such consumer misbehaviors (Vitell, 2003).

The various studies contained in this doctoral dissertation aim to contribute to the consumer ethics domain by tackling three particular topics. First, I focus on the role of personality—specifically, self-regulatory focus—in consumer ethical beliefs (i.e., consumers' judgments<sup>2</sup> of various unethical consumer practices). Despite recognition of the general relevance of personal characteristics for individual ethical decision making, we need more research to examine the role of specific personality characteristics in the consumer ethics domain (Vitell, 2003).

Second, this doctoral dissertation addresses the role of intuitive feelings in moral decision making. Traditional views regard ethical decision making as the result of a rational process (e.g., Kohlberg, 1976). More recent research instead asserts an important role of intuition in the moral domain and calls for further insights (e.g., Haidt, 2001). Therefore, I examine the impact of affective priming and conceptual fluency, a particular form of meta-cognitive experiences, on people's moral judgment.



Third, many studies have investigated perceptions of questionable business practices. To a lesser extent, perceptions of questionable consumer practices have been studied. Nevertheless, studies dealing with comparisons of these two perceptions are scarce. Yet, research shows that people tend to evaluate questionable business behaviors more harshly than similar consumer behaviors (e.g., DePaulo, 1985, 1987; Vermeir & Van Kenhove, 2008). This phenomenon has been labeled ‘double standards’, a specific instance of so-called ‘moral hypocrisy’. This dissertation considers this later theme as well.

Before providing an overview of the various studies that constitute this doctoral dissertation, I elaborate on some core concepts of the reported research in this dissertation. These concepts are central to the consumer ethics domain as well. First, I elaborate on the Consumer Ethics Scale (Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992, 2005), which has been applied by various empirical studies in the consumer ethics domain to measure the extent to which individuals tolerate various questionable consumer practices. Second, I address the role of personality characteristics in the consumer ethics domain. Third, this chapter sheds some light on the ratio versus intuition debate in the moral domain. Fourth, I explain the concepts of moral hypocrisy and double standards in more detail, before elucidating neutralization techniques.

## **1. Core Concepts**

### ***1.1. Consumer Ethics Scale***

Early models of marketing ethics, such as Ferrell and Gresham’s (1985) and Hunt and Vitell’s (1986), focused on the seller side (i.e., business) of the buyer–seller relationship. Less attention was devoted to the buyer side (i.e., consumer; e.g., Vitell, Lumpkin, & Rawwas, 1991). To tackle this gap in marketing ethics literature, Muncy and Vitell (1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992) developed the Consumer Ethics Scale. This scale determines the extent to which individuals believe certain questionable consumer behaviors are (un)ethical. Results from their survey of 569 U.S. heads of households indicated that consumers react differently to different ethical issues. More specifically,

Muncy and Vitell (1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992) identified four distinct constructs of ethically questionable consumer practices: (1) actively benefiting from illegal activities, (2) passively benefiting at the expense of others, (3) actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices, and (4) no harm/no foul.

The distinguishing features of practices in the first category include their initiation by the consumer and the fact that they are almost universally perceived as illegal (e.g., changing price tags on merchandise in a store). The second category comprises situations in which the consumer takes advantage of a seller's mistake, rather than actively cheating (e.g., getting too much change at the checkout and not saying anything). In the third dimension, the consumer is actively involved in deceptive practices that might not necessarily be perceived as illegal but rather as morally questionable (e.g., not telling the truth when negotiating the price of a new car). Finally, the fourth dimension contains actions that most consumers perceive as causing little or no harm, and thus view as quite permissible. An example of this "no harm/no foul" category is spending extensive time trying on clothing but not buying anything.

Muncy and Vitell (1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992) find that overall, consumers perceive activities from the first dimension as more unethical than those from the second dimension. Perhaps, consumers think that if they do not initiate the questionable practice, then ethical issues are resolved. In other words, a first issue on which consumers seem to base their ethical judgments is whether the consumer actively seeks a benefit or is rather passive in the process (i.e., locus of fault). Yet, the same research confirmed that consumers tolerate activities from the "passively benefiting" category less than activities that fall in the third "actively benefiting" dimension. Consequently, a second issue that consumers seem to take into account when forming ethical judgments is whether the action may be perceived as illegal (i.e., legality of behavior). Nevertheless, both ideas (i.e., 'locus of fault' and 'legality of behavior') emerge in these studies (Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992). Finally, consumers evaluated some practices as not unethical at all. These practices belong to the "no harm, no foul" dimension which mainly involve the copying of intellectual property. So a final issue on which consumers seem to base their ethical judgments is whether there is any perceived harm to the seller (i.e., 'degree of harm caused').

Empirical studies in the consumer ethics field have often adopted the Consumer Ethics Scale (Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992, 2005) and applied it to various samples, either within one country (e.g., Chiou & Pan, 2008; Kavak, Gurel, Eryigit, & Tektas, 2009; Lu & Lu, 2010) or cross-culturally (e.g., Al-Khatib, Vitell, Rexeisen, & Rawwas, 2005; Rawwas, Swaidan, & Oyman, 2005; Schneider, Krieger, & Bayraktar, 2011). Despite differences in their focus, these various studies all support a relatively consistent factor structure for the Consumer Ethics Scale (i.e., ‘locus of fault’, ‘legality of behavior’, and ‘degree of harm caused’; e.g. Rawwas & Singhapakdi, 1998). Lascu (1993) considers the extent to which several ethics scales are appropriate for use in cross-cultural studies. Using a panel of expert assessments, he determined that the Consumer Ethics Scale is appropriate to use in cross-cultural studies, though some items might need rewording (e.g., “supermarket” should be changed to “store”). Because ethical judgments are situation-specific (Barnett & Karson, 1987), a good measurement scale should cover ethical behaviors in a wide variety of situations, as is true of the Consumer Ethics Scale.

In 2005, Vitell and Muncy have updated their Consumer Ethics Scale by rewording and adding several new items that represent three distinct categories: (1) downloading/buying counterfeit goods (e.g., buying counterfeit goods instead of buying the original manufacturers’ brands), (2) recycling/environmental awareness (e.g., buying only from companies with a strong record of protecting the environment), and (3) doing the right thing/doing good (e.g., correcting a bill that has been miscalculated in one’s favor).

### ***1.2. Personality as an Antecedent of Consumer Ethics***

At least three comprehensive, theoretical models are relevant for studying decision-making processes about ethical issues in marketing and business (i.e., Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Hunt & Vitell, 1986, 1993; Trevino, 1986). The Hunt-Vitell model (Hunt & Vitell, 1986, 1993) emerges as the most appropriate for investigating individual consumer behavior though (Vitell, 2003), because it eliminates constructs related to professional, organizational, and industry environments. This model (Hunt & Vitell, 1986, 1993) states that, next to cultural environment, personal characteristics provide

background factors that influence people's ethical decision making processes. Literature dealing with unethical behavior generally distinguishes two broad categories that interactively influence individual ethical decision behavior. The first includes personality variables associated with the individual decision maker; the second category refers to situational variables that form and define the situation in which the decision maker reaches those decisions (Wirtz & Kum, 2004). A variable in the latter category is one's cultural environment, as postulated by the Hunt-Vitell model (Hunt & Vitell, 1986, 1993).

The establishment of the Consumer Ethics Scale (Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992) prompted an increase in studies to tie consumer ethical beliefs to one or more personality variables. Several studies examined and found evidence of an influence of socio-demographic variables, such as age (e.g., Vitell, Singh, & Paolillo, 2007), income (e.g., Vitell & Paolillo, 2003), and education (e.g., Swaidan, Vitell, & Rawwas, 2003). The impacts of attitudinal characteristics on consumer ethics were studied with variables such as attitude toward mankind, attitude toward business, and attitude toward illegal acts (Chan, Wong, & Leung, 1998). Several studies also have investigated the role of individual difference variables on Consumer Ethics Scale scores (Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992, 2005), including risk propensity (e.g., Rallapalli, Vitell, Wiebe, & Barnes, 1994), consumer alienation (e.g., Vitell & Paolillo, 2003), and materialism (e.g., Muncy & Eastman, 1998). Finally, religion (e.g., Vitell et al., 2007) and cognitive moral development (e.g., Rawwas & Singhapakdi, 1998) have been tied to the Consumer Ethics Scale (Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992, 2005).

Beyond this widespread reliance on the Consumer Ethics Scale (Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992, 2005) to gain a better insight into consumer ethics, other studies have taken different approaches to examine the consumer ethics domain (Vitell, 2003). Some of these studies also test personal characteristics that might influence ethical judgments and intentions, such as value consciousness and level of integrity (e.g., Ang, Cheng, Lim, & Tambyah, 2001). However, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to give a complete overview of all the personal characteristics that already have been linked to the consumer ethics domain; I refer readers to review articles, such as Vitell's (2003) for such detailed information.

In *Chapter 2*, the relationship between self-regulatory focus and consumer ethical beliefs is investigated. Although this personality variable will be explained in more detail in that chapter, we now briefly explain what this construct is about. Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) postulates that two separate and independent self-regulatory orientations guide people's goal-directed behavior: promotion focus and prevention focus. Both foci are assumed to be related to different needs, desired end states, and strategic inclinations to achieve these needs and states. Promotion focus is founded on nurturance related needs (e.g., hopes, accomplishments, advancement) and goals are framed as ideals. People with such a focus are strategically concerned with approaching gains and avoiding non-gains. Prevention focus, on the other hand, is founded on security related needs (e.g., safety, responsibility) and perceives goals as oughts. Prevention focused people are strategically inclined to approach non-losses and to avoid losses. Individuals with a prevention focus, whether chronically or situationally induced, thus prefer a vigilant strategy whereas individuals with a promotion focus prefer an eager strategy (Crowe & Higgins, 1997).

### ***1.3. Morality: Ratio versus Intuition***

Traditionally, moral judgments have been considered as the result of rational and deliberate reasoning processes (e.g., Jones, 1991; Turiel, 1983). Kohlberg's study (1976) exemplifies this rational approach. Kohlberg (1976) characterizes children's moral development by focusing on the content of their justifications rather than on the source of their moral judgments. This perspective implicitly assumes that people generate moral judgments by consciously reasoning about the principles they articulate in their moral justifications (Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006).

This traditional point of view has been challenged by the more recent idea of bounded ethicality. Similar to the "bounded rationality" principle which entails that individuals are prone to systematic and predictable cognitive errors, the idea of bounded ethicality postulates that individuals are prone to systematic and predictable *ethical* errors as well. Stated otherwise, bounded ethicality refers to the systematic and predictable ways in which humans act unethically beyond their awareness (Chugh, Bazerman, & Banaji, 2005).

First of all, people are bounded in their own ethicality. For instance, Kern and Chugh (2009) demonstrated that people act differently in the face of a potential loss compared to a potential gain, even when the two situations are transparently identical. More specifically, people acted more unethical if a decision was presented in a loss frame compared to a gain frame. Second, people are also bounded in noticing the ethicality of others. For instance, Gino, Moore, and Bazerman (2009) showed the influence of the outcome bias in people's judgment of others' unethical behavior. Results indicated that people are more likely to judge others' unethical behavior more harshly when this behavior results in a negative compared to a positive outcome. In sum, the bounded ethicality principle implies that people may be unable to recognize the ethical considerations of any particular situation or decision (Gino & Bazerman, 2009). That is, people may be able to perceive themselves and others as moral beings even as they make immoral decisions (Chugh et al., 2005).

The idea of unconsciousness playing a primordial role in the moral domain receives support from recent research on moral intuition. In contrast with the conscious-reasoning perspective on moral judgment (e.g., Jones, 1991; Kohlberg, 1976; Turiel, 1983), some scholars argue that moral decision making is influenced, if not dominated, by intuitive factors (e.g., Haidt, 2001; Reynolds, 2006; Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008), such that deliberate reasoning plays only a secondary role (Hofmann & Baumert, 2010). Haidt (2001, p. 818) defines moral intuition as "the sudden appearance in consciousness of a moral judgment, including an affective valence (good-bad, like-dislike), without any conscious awareness of having gone through steps of searching, weighing evidence, or inferring a conclusion." Haidt's (2001) social intuitionist model thus proposes that moral judgments result from quick moral intuitions, followed, when needed, by slow, ex post facto moral reasoning.

Research dealing with the role of intuitive feelings in the moral domain has increased recently. For example, moral research dealing with metaphor-representation theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Meier & Robinson, 2005) fits with the intuitive perspective on moral judgments. This theory postulates that abstract knowledge representation can be aided with conceptual metaphors: People not only communicate by means of metaphors but also think that way (Meier, Hauser, Robinson, Friesen, & Schjeldahl, 2007). Morality then is an abstract concept, used to describe behavior or beliefs that are considered right and moral (e.g., fairness) or wrong and immoral (e.g., intolerance; Haidt & Algoe,

2004; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Previous research shows that people often use metaphors to discuss morality. For example, Meier, Sellbom, and Wygant (2007) show that people have implicit associations between morality and vertical space (i.e., moral is up; immoral is down).

Adherents to the moral intuition perspective are not necessarily anti-rationalists. Rather, they emphasize the existence of complex, dynamic interrelationships between reasoning *and* intuition as two processes that result in moral judgments (e.g., Haidt, 2001). These two perspectives on how people arrive at moral judgments (i.e., moral reasoning and moral intuition) have been combined in a dual-process model (e.g., Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Greene, Morelli, Lowenberg, Nystrom, & Cohen, 2008). Greene and colleagues more specifically postulate that people make moral judgments by combining automatic and more controlled processes, such that they use the controlled cognitive processes to overcome their initial quick and automatic moral judgment responses (Greene & Haidt, 2002; Greene et al., 2008; Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004; Greene et al., 2001). This proposition fits the central notion of dual-system models of information processing, which contrast an automatic, fast, effortless, and unintentional route or system of processing with a controlled, slow, effortful, and intentional one (e.g., Epstein, 1994; Strack & Deutsch, 2004).

Cushman et al. (2006) support the idea that moral judgment might be accomplished through multiple (being rational and intuitive) systems. These authors examined three specific moral principles: (1) harm caused by action is worse compared to harm caused by omission, (2) harm intended as the means to a goal is worse compared to harm foreseen as the side effect of a goal, and (3) harm involving physical contact with the victim is worse compared to harm involving no physical contact. Results showed that individuals appealed to the first and the third principle in their justifications, but not to the second one. In other words, the first and third principle were available to conscious reasoning, while the second was not. In general, some moral principles are available for conscious reflection, permitting but not guaranteeing a role for conscious reasoning, whereas others are better characterized by an intuitionist model. Regardless of where the division between affect and cognition occurs, a multisystem model of moral judgment appears warranted.

In contributing to the recent research stream on the role of intuitive feelings in the moral domain, *Chapter 3* investigates the impact of affective priming and conceptual fluency on moral

judgments. Although these concepts will be addressed in *Chapter 3*, we briefly explain them in this introductory chapter as well. First of all, affective priming contends that a target that is preceded by a prime is processed faster and more accurately if the prime and the target have the same valence compared to an opposite valence (see Fazio, 2001; Klauer & Musch, 2003). For instance, individuals identify the word *disaster* faster when it is preceded by the word *cancer* than when the word *sunshine* appears first.

Second, conceptual fluency is a specific instance of processing fluency. This latter metacognitive experience refers to a subjective sense of ease versus difficulty in processing information and stimuli. Experiencing processing fluency evokes a positive affective state that people misattribute to the stimuli they are processing rather than to the ease of processing (Winkielman, Schwarz, Fazendeiro, & Reber, 2003). For instance, people regard their childhood memories as more intact when they must recall four episodes from their childhood instead of twelve (Winkielman, Schwarz & Belli, 1998) as retrieving just four episodes is presumably easier compared to retrieving twelve episodes. This ease (versus difficulty) during the retrieval task then gets attributed to the quality of childhood memory rather than to the task at hand.

Conceptual fluency is a specific instance of processing fluency and arises when the mental representation of a stimulus is easy to activate because it offers semantic relatedness to the context in which it appears (e.g., Whittlesea, 1993). So if people would have to evaluate a boat, their evaluation would be more positive if they were at the seaside compared to when they were in the mountains. An example of a conceptual fluency study is the one of Lee and Labroo (2004). They examined the effect of conceptual fluency on attitudes. Their study demonstrated that when a target comes to mind more readily and becomes conceptually fluent, as when it is presented in a predictive context (e.g., a bottle of beer featured in an ad showing a man entering a bar), or when it is primed by a related construct (e.g., ketchup following an advertisement of mayonnaise), participants develop more favorable attitudes toward the target. Positive valence of fluent processing is thought to underlie these findings.



#### ***1.4. Moral Hypocrisy***

Academic literature has approached the moral hypocrisy phenomenon in two ways. Some studies focus on the discrepancy between people's expressed moral standards and their actual behavior (e.g., Batson, Kobryniewicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, & Wilson, 1997; Batson & Thompson, 2001; Batson, Thompson, Seufferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999; Stone, Wiegand, Cooper, & Aronson, 1997). In this sense, moral hypocrisy implies publicly maintaining certain moral norms while privately violating these norms through one's behavior. Other studies examine the discrepancy between people's evaluations of moral transgressions committed by themselves versus those by others (e.g., Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007, 2008). In this context, moral hypocrisy refers to "a fundamental bias in moral judgment in which individuals evaluate a moral transgression enacted by themselves to be less objectionable than an identical transgression enacted by others" (Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007, p. 1334).

The double standard concept from marketing ethics literature aligns with this latter approach. Business research suggests that people judge the unethical behavior of businesses (or their representatives) more harshly than similar behavior by individual consumers. For example, Wilkes (1978) finds that consumers tend to hold businesses to a higher standard than they themselves are willing to follow. Specifically, he investigates consumers' judgments of certain consumer activities (e.g. shoplifting, false warranty claims). Even when consumers disapprove of engaging in questionable activities, they tolerate some of them, justifying these "points of tolerance" by arguing that the business, rather than the consumer, is at fault. Drucker (1981) maintains that a double standard is implicit in treatments of business ethics and business social responsibility as topics separate from ethics in general. Establishing "business ethics" means holding business to a different (i.e., higher) standard of conduct than "ordinary people."

To demonstrate the double standard empirically, DePaulo (1985) conducted a telephone survey and asked respondents to indicate whether they feel that similar misconduct (i.e., saying things that are not true when bargaining to increase or lower a price) by a salesperson and a consumer is wrong. Only 8 percent of the respondents openly admitted to a double standard, asserting that

deception was wrong for the salesperson but not for the customer. However, DePaulo (1987) argues that this 8 percent figure probably underestimates the prevalence of double standards, because respondents may realize their inconsistency and find it embarrassing, or because this study did not investigate the degree of perceived wrongness. To avoid these problems in a follow-up study, DePaulo (1987) used a between-groups design with two versions of an anonymous questionnaire that asked respondents to evaluate an automobile salesperson or a customer using similar deceptive bargaining tactics. Respondents were more critical of sellers who engaged in potentially unethical behavior than they were of buyers undertaking the same practices.

Vermeir and Van Kenhove (2008) recently confirmed DePaulo's (1985, 1987) work, showing that consumers have a double standard when it comes to their own unethical behavior compared to that of businesses. Specifically, their participants evaluate unethical business actions as less admissible than similar unethical consumer actions. Further, their study shows evidence for the role of gender as women are less likely to use double standards compared to men.

### ***1.5. Neutralization Techniques***

The concept of neutralization techniques stems from social disorganization and deviance literature and, more specifically, the work of Sykes and Matza (1957). They wondered how it was possible for juvenile delinquents to show deviant behavior while, at the same time, also evincing awareness of conventional social values and an understanding of their behavior as wrong. Neutralization theory (Sykes & Matza, 1957) postulates that most juvenile delinquents are able to commit questionable practices while supporting social norms by employing neutralization techniques. These techniques are justifications people use to explain away their non-normative behavior and lessen the impact of the behavior on their self-concepts and social relationships. In this way, feelings of shame and guilt they feel for violating societal norms are mitigated.

The flexibility of normative systems enables people to neutralize. In other words, social norms are still valid for people, but are also limited in their applicability due to time, place, and/or personal and social circumstantial factors (Chatzidakis, Hibbert, & Smith, 2007; Strutton, Pelton, & Ferrell,

1997). So when a person neutralizes, he or she does not reject existing norms but rather believes that these norms are not applicable in the current circumstances (e.g., due to external pressures, time constraints, etc.). Because the person conducting the questionable behavior feels the need to explain away the behavior, it actually is evidence that the person is supporting existing norms and values (Vitell, Keith, & Mathur, 2011).

Neutralization theory also recalls the concept of moral disengagement (specifically, moral justification as a form of moral disengagement), a process to make detrimental conduct personally tolerable by persuading oneself that the questionable behavior is morally admissible (Bandura, 1990; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Through moral disengagement, people escape self-sanction and the accompanying guilt that would ensue if their behavior violated their internal standards, such that they are more likely to make unethical decisions (Detert, Trevino, & Sweitzer, 2008). One form of moral disengagement is moral justification, which refers to the act of validating and rationalizing unethical behavior by cognitively reconstructing the questionable behavior (Bandura, 1999). In this sense, the concept of moral justification is similar to the neutralization techniques described by Sykes and Matza (1957).

When they introduced the concept of neutralization into the marketing ethics domain, Vitell and Grove (1987) addressed the need for more conceptual work in this domain and examined relevant techniques to explain unethical behaviors among *marketing practitioners*. Some years later, Grove, Vitell, and Strutton (1989) presented a model of neutralization techniques to discuss how *consumers* might justify their non-normative behavior. In line with Sykes and Matza's (1957) work, consumers can explain away negative behavior by invoking five distinct techniques that represent various motives that insulate consumers from blame.

The first technique, denial of responsibility, implies that people argue that they are not accountable for their norm-violating actions, because factors beyond their control are in operation. A typical example might state: "It's not my fault, I had no other choice." The second technique is denial of injury, such that people contend their misbehavior is not really serious, because no party suffers directly as a result of it, such as "What's the big deal? No one was hurt." A denial of victim rationalization means that individuals counter any blame for their actions by arguing that the violated

party deserves whatever injury was received. One might comment, “If they’re foolish enough to believe that, it’s their own fault they were taken advantage of.” By condemning the condemners, individuals deflect moral condemnation to those ridiculing them by pointing out that they engage in similar behavior, such as “I was only doing what others do all the time.” Finally, the last neutralization technique is an appeal to higher loyalties, in which questionable behavior appears as a by-product of attempts to actualize a higher order ideal or value. An exemplary comment might protest, “To some what I did may appear wrong, but I did it for my friends and family.”

Several studies have investigated consumers’ use of these neutralization techniques in more depth, including which situations evoke a greater extent of neutralization. For example, Strutton, Vitell, and Pelton (1994) compare the extent to which a consumer engages in neutralization during acquisition versus disposition situations. They find that the techniques of neutralization appear more appropriate as an explanatory framework when the situations involve an unethical disposition, rather than an acquisition, of retail goods. Other studies investigate which people are more likely to use neutralization techniques. Strutton et al. (1997) compare the extent of neutralizing between two generations (i.e., Thirteeners and PB’ers) and find that younger people were more likely to attempt to rationalize away unethical retailing consumption behaviors than their parents’ generation was. Rosenbaum and Kuntze (2003) show that consumers with high levels of cynicism also are more likely to employ techniques to justify their unethical retail disposition. A study by Bersoff (1999) reveals decreased unethical behavior (i.e., more participants pointed out overpayments for taking part in a study) when the participants’ abilities to construct neutralizations were impeded. Again, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to give a complete overview of all studies dedicated to neutralization techniques, though this concept is worthy of investigation, considering its potential to explain why “ordinary people” sometimes engage in unethical behaviors (Vitell, 2003).

I now return to the concept of bounded ethicality, or the idea that moral concerns are influenced by automatic, self-favoring interpretations, which ultimately results in people being able to see themselves as moral beings even as they engage in immoral decisions (Chugh et al., 2005). The fact that these processes rarely take place consciously is supported by recent research on morality, intuition, and affect, and especially studies of the concepts of moral intuition (e.g., Haidt, 2001) and

moral disengagement (e.g., Bandura, 1999) (De Cremer, 2009). These psychological processes invoke the so-called ethical fading phenomenon, “a process that removes the difficult moral issues from a given problem or situation, hence increasing unethical behavior” (Tenbrunsel, 2005, p. 96). The ethical implications of decisions fade away because of the underlying dynamics of people’s self-serving and self-deceiving perceptions (De Cremer, 2009).

## **2. Overview of Studies**

To end this introductory chapter, I provide an outline of the studies included in this doctoral dissertation. The studies in the following four chapters focus on three specific topics: (1) the role of personality in consumer ethical beliefs (*Chapter 2*), (2) the role of intuitive feelings in moral decision making (*Chapter 3*), and (3) the moral hypocrisy phenomenon (*Chapters 4–5*)<sup>3</sup>. At the end of this chapter, the structure of this doctoral dissertation is visually represented. This table (*Table 1*) outlines each study by means of the general topic, the respective chapter, as well as the independent and dependent variables that are studied.

### ***2.1. The Role of Personality in Consumer Ethical Beliefs***

The importance of personality for consumer ethics has been supported (e.g., Hunt & Vitell, 1986, 1993). However, insufficient research has considered the relationship between *specific* personality characteristics and commonplace crimes, such as unethical consumer behavior (Egan & Taylor, 2010). Consequently, many researchers call for further investigation of the possible antecedents of undesirable consumer behavior (e.g., Al-Rafee & Cronan, 2006; Fullerton & Punj, 2004; Vitell, 2003). Therefore, this doctoral dissertation begins by examining the impact of a specific personality variable on consumer ethics. More specifically, **Chapter 2** deals with the relationship between self-regulatory focus and consumer ethical beliefs (i.e., individuals’ judgments of various unethical consumer practices).

Self-regulatory focus is highly influential and has appeared in relation to an impressively wide spectrum of topics across a diverse array of domains (for an overview, see Higgins & Spiegel, 2004). However, little research has been done about this construct in the marketing domain (e.g., Aaker & Lee, 2001; Andrade, 2005; Cohen & Andrade, 2004; Kidwell, Hardesty, & Childers, 2008) while no studies ever linked this personality characteristic to individuals' consumer ethical beliefs. As a basic distinction, promotion- versus prevention-focused self-regulation appears to have a pervasive impact on human judgment, thought, and behavior (e.g., Aaker & Lee, 2001; Zhou & Pham, 2004). Accordingly, self-regulatory focus offers promising potential for the study of consumer ethics.

Results described in both Study 1, conducted among students, and Study 2, conducted among a sample drawn from a more general population, show a significant relationship between self-regulatory focus and consumer ethical beliefs. First of all, promotion influences individuals' attitude toward questionable practices: those with a higher (versus lower) promotion focus perceive such questionable practices as less unacceptable. Second, prevention also impacts consumer ethical beliefs: people scoring higher (versus lower) on prevention are more likely to not tolerate these various types of consumer misbehavior.

These findings contribute to the marketing ethics field in which most attention to date has been focused on the (un)acceptability of business practices, while less attention has been paid to the (un)acceptability of consumer practices (Neale & Fullerton, 2010). Further, this study also adds to the knowledge already developed about self-regulatory focus in the marketing domain making the present study valuable for marketing theorists. Research fields are prone to stay within the own literature boundaries. Nevertheless, developing more knowledge about phenomena with a rich but diverse research tradition as consumer ethics necessitates enrichment by delving into the wide existing array of perspectives and positions (Reynolds & Harris, 2009).

The established relationship between self-regulatory focus and consumer ethics also is of practical relevance as self-regulatory focus not only varies across individuals but also across situations (e.g., Friedman & Förster, 2001; Roney, Higgins, & Shah, 1995). In other words, self-regulatory focus can temporarily be induced so to lower consumer misbehavior. Moreover, if people's chronic self-regulatory focus is not known to those who want to influence people's ethical decision making, self-

regulatory focus can be assessed through more easy to infer characteristics such as individuals' cultural background (Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000) or professional occupation (Förster, Higgins, & Bianco, 2003).

## ***2.2. The Role of Intuitive Feelings in Moral Decision Making***

Colors are prevalent in people's live (Mehta & Zhu, 2009), but involve more than aesthetics in that they also carry psychological meanings and associations. **Chapter 3** investigates if and how the valence of color cues might affect evaluations of positively and negatively valenced behaviors. Study 1 and Study 2 use colors with definite differences in terms of valence (i.e., red and green), while Study 3 endows initially neutral colors with positive versus negative valences. Intriguingly, these three studies show an ironic color effect: undesirable behaviors are evaluated less negatively when described on a negatively (versus positively) valenced background color. Or, using colors with a negative valence in campaigns aiming to prevent negatively valenced behavior may actually backfire as it renders the undesirable behavior less unacceptable.

This chapter contributes in several ways. First of all, these studies add to the emerging research stream on color functioning (e.g., Deng, Hui, & Hutchinson, 2010; Lindsey et al., 2010). Second, several studies exemplify the positive effects derived from a match among message elements (e.g., Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1990; Mayer & Tormala, 2010; Zhao & Pechmann, 2007). In contrast, we find that a match may backfire in persuasive contexts: processing fluency may turn out badly when the ensuing positive affect gets attributed to the behavior, rather than to the processing, and makes negative behavior seem less negative. Third, by demonstrating the effect of seemingly irrelevant color cues on moral judgments, the studies reported in *Chapter 3* add to recent research on intuitive feelings in the moral domain (e.g., Meier, Robinson, & Clore, 2004). Fourth, this research identifies an important and ubiquitous source of conceptual fluency that has been previously overlooked, namely, fluency stemming from a *valence* match between a stimulus and its context, rather than from semantic priming.

The findings reported in *Chapter 3* are of practical relevance. Decision makers who want to promote desirable behavior or discourage undesirable behavior should avoid colors with a negative valence in the prevention and promotion campaigns they develop. Especially the color red or other negatively valenced colors appear ill conceived for such campaigns. Even if decision makers prefer to use the color red as it draws people's attention, they should be aware of the fact that using this color might render undesirable behaviors less negative and desirable behaviors less positive. Our findings also suggest that undesirable behavior, like petty crime, might be more likely if the physical environment prompts negative evaluations.

### **2.3. Moral Hypocrisy**

A growing amount of studies deals with the (un)acceptability of business practices. To a much lesser extent, research on the (un)acceptability of consumer practices is growing. However, studies that deal with the comparison of both acceptability ratings remain scarce. Yet, previous research shows evidence for double standards; that is, business misbehavior is judged more harshly compared to similar consumer misbehavior (e.g., DePaulo, 1985, 1987; Vermeir & Van Kenhove, 2008). Although this double standard phenomenon has often been quoted as an important research line in the ethics domain (e.g., Rallapalli et al., 1994; Rawwas, Vitell, & Al-Khatib, 1994; Vitell et al., 1991; Vitell & Muncy, 1992) and is of relevance for the business world (Vermeir & Van Kenhove, 2008), little work has been done on it.

One of the gaps with regard to the double standard phenomenon involves the investigation of possible underlying mechanisms (cf. Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2008). Both *Chapter 4* and *Chapter 5* deal with this particular issue. **Chapter 4** more particularly examines whether neutralization techniques might provide a meaningful approach. Accordingly, this chapter adds to the limited work related to neutralization techniques in the field of consumer behavior (Chatzidakis et al., 2007). Findings demonstrate that the higher the extent to which people agree with arguments explaining away misbehavior enacted by consumers or businesses, the more they tolerate these misbehaviors. More importantly, these techniques give an answer on the question why people judge businesses more



harshly compared to consumers; that is, why people use double standards. More specifically, results show that respondents who justify questionable actions of consumers to a certain degree, condone the same mistreatment enacted by businesses to a much lesser extent. In this way, the techniques of neutralization concern a process explaining the double standard phenomenon. Therefore, a valuable strategy to lower the use of double standards might be to make it harder to explain away consumer misbehavior (cf. Bersoff, 1999).

As DePaulo wondered in 1987, to what extent might double standards arise because one party is a business (or its representative), while the other is a consumer? He argues that the critical underlying factor could be the perceived wealth of the negotiating party. In other words, misbehavior instigated by a business may appear less acceptable because it seems more financially secure and thus less in need of gaining additional financial benefits through deceptive practices. In addition to investigating wealth as a possible motivator of double standards, **Chapter 5** investigates whether the use of double standards might reflect respondents' relationship with businesses versus other consumers. That is, perhaps double standards exist because respondents feel more related to other consumers, compared with businesses.

Results of Study 1 show that individuals were not only harsher for unethical behavior by business companies (compared to consumers), but also for unethical behavior by prosperous consumers (compared to non-prosperous consumers) and prosperous business companies (compared to non-prosperous business companies). Stated otherwise, the perceived difference in wealth between subjects may lead to different moral judgments of unethical behavior enacted by these subjects. Results of Study 2 demonstrate that individuals were not only less tolerant of unethical behavior by business companies (compared to consumers), but also of unethical behavior by consumers (versus one's best friend) and business companies with which they have a not so good relationship (versus business companies with which they have a good relationship). In other words, the difference in relationship with subjects may lead to different moral judgments of unethical behavior enacted by these subjects. Taken together, as wealth and relationship underlie double standards, double standards are not strictly reserved to consumer–business relations (cf. previous studies on double standards; e.g.,

DePaulo, 1985, 1987), but might emerge in business–business and consumer–consumer relations as well.

These findings imply that, although earnings have benefits for a company, companies should realize that strong financial figures may backfire as they allow individuals to adopt a more critical view of their deceptive practices. Further, previous research shows that consumers who are highly committed to a company behave more ethically toward it than do less committed consumers (Steenhaut & Van Kenhove, 2005). The findings reported in Study 2 contribute to and extend this finding; highly committed consumers also are more tolerant of the company's unethical behaviors than are less committed consumers. These results clearly emphasize the need for businesses to keep investing time and energy in developing high relationship commitment with stakeholders, because these strong relationships make stakeholders less morally condemning.

*Table 1*  
*Structure of doctoral dissertation*

Topic	Chapter	Study	Independent variables	Dependent variables
<b>The Role of Personality in Consumer Ethical Beliefs</b>	<b>Chapter 2:</b> Consumer Ethics: The Role of Self-Regulatory Focus	Study 1 (Students)	Self-regulatory focus (BIS/BAS Scales; Carver & White, 1994; Franken, Muris, & Rassin, 2005)	Consumer ethical beliefs (Consumer Ethics Scale; Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992, 2005)
		Study 2 (Non-students)	Self-regulatory focus (BIS/BAS Scales; Carver & White, 1994; Franken, Muris, & Rassin, 2005)	Consumer ethical beliefs (Consumer Ethics Scale; Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992, 2005)
<b>The Role of Intuitive Feelings in Moral Decision Making</b>	<b>Chapter 3:</b> When Colors Backfire: The Impact of Color Cues on Moral Judgment	Study 1	2 (Behavior: Illegal vs. Legal music downloading) 2 (Background color: Red vs. Green)	Moral acceptability judgment
		Study 2	2 (Behavior: Undesirable vs. Desirable) 2 (Background color: Red vs. Green)	Moral acceptability judgment
		Study 3	2 (Behavior: Undesirable vs. Desirable) 3 (Background color valence: Negative vs. Positive vs. Neutral)	Moral acceptability judgment

*Table 1(continued)*  
*Structure of doctoral dissertation*

Topic	Chapter	Study	Independent variables	Dependent variables
Moral Hypocrisy	<b>Chapter 4:</b> Double Standards: The Role of Techniques of Neutralization		2 (Version: Consumer vs. Corporation)	Extent of neutralization
	<b>Chapter 5:</b> “What’s the harm in being unethical? These strangers are rich anyway!” Exploring Underlying Factors of Double Standards	Study 1	2 (Subject: Consumer vs. Business) 2 (Wealth: Prosperous vs. Non-prosperous)	Moral acceptability judgment
		Study 2	2 (Subject: Consumer vs. Business) 2 (Relationship: Not good vs. Good)	Moral acceptability judgment

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A wide range of terms has been used to refer to misbehavior by consumers, such as deviant consumer behavior, aberrant consumer behavior, problem customers, unethical consumer behavior, inappropriate behavior, jaycustomers, immoral consumer behavior, non-normative behavior, and unfair customers (Fisk et al., 2010). These terms are used interchangeably throughout this dissertation.

<sup>2</sup> In *Chapter 2*, respondents have to indicate how acceptable they believe various questionable consumer practices to be. These beliefs are expected to reflect their own level of ethicality. In *Chapter 3*, respondents' judgments mainly involve judgments about other consumers' ethical behavior. Finally, in *Chapters 4* and *5*, participants also evaluate others' undesirable behavior, others being equal to other consumers or companies.

<sup>3</sup> The respondents who participated in the studies reported in this doctoral dissertation were all Dutch speaking. All the appendices therefore show the original Dutch scenarios and measurement scales used in the described studies. Next to these Dutch versions, the English translations of these scenarios and measurement scales are also included in the appendices.

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### **Websites**

Business Software Alliance: [www.bsa.org](http://www.bsa.org)

Centre for Retail Research: [www.retailresearch.org](http://www.retailresearch.org)

Tera Consultants: [www.teraconsultants.fr](http://www.teraconsultants.fr)







## **Chapter 2:**

### **Consumer Ethics: The Role of Self-Regulatory Focus**

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This chapter is based on De Bock, T., & Van Kenhove, P. (2010). Consumer ethics: The role of self-regulatory focus. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 97(2), 241-255.



## Chapter 2:

### Consumer Ethics: The Role of Self-Regulatory Focus

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#### 1. Abstract

The two studies reported in this chapter investigate the influence of self-regulatory focus on consumer ethical beliefs (i.e., consumers' judgment of various unethical consumer practices). The self-regulatory focus framework is highly influential and applies to an impressively wide spectrum of topics across a diverse array of domains. However, previous research has not yet examined the link between this personality construct and consumer ethical beliefs. Further, there is a call for more research into the antecedents of consumer misbehavior.

Study 1 uses a student sample, while Study 2, for reasons of generalizability, uses a sample drawn from a more general population. Findings of both studies are identical. More specifically, they indicate that promotion affects one's attitude toward questionable consumer practices with those having a stronger (versus weaker) promotion focus being more likely to evaluate these consumer misbehaviors as less unacceptable. Further, both studies show that prevention influences one's perception of morally dubious consumer practices with those having a stronger (versus weaker) prevention focus being more inclined to evaluate these questionable consumer activities as unacceptable.

Keywords: consumer ethical beliefs, consumer ethics, Consumer Ethics Scale, personality, self-regulatory focus

## 2. Introduction

Contrary to what is brought up by the concept of customer sovereignty (i.e., customers will behave in a manner that is both rational and functional), research indicates that consumer misbehavior is not part of a small criminal subculture but representative of consumers in general (Fullerton & Punj, 2004; Reynolds & Harris, 2009). Focusing on just one individual form of unethical consumer behavior, shoplifting, previous studies represent the shoplifter as a general consumer rather than a distinct criminal type. For example, research estimates that as many as 60 percent of consumers have shoplifted at least once in their lifetime (Klemke, 1992). When the business world wants to tackle consumer misbehavior, they need a better insight into why consumers believe these questionable consumer practices to be acceptable. The overall importance of personality in the consumer ethics field has been supported (e.g., Hunt & Vitell, 1986, 1993), but the roles of more *specific* personality variables are less certain (Vitell, Singhapakdi, & Thomas, 2001). This leads researchers to call for more studies that examine the range of personality antecedents of consumer ethics (e.g., Vitell, 2003). The aim of the present study is to enrich the consumer ethics field by investigating the impact of self-regulatory focus on individuals' beliefs concerning unethical consumer practices.

The regulatory focus framework (Higgins, 1997, 1998) enjoys rapidly growing interest in academic literature, being a core personality variable in the more general domain of consumer behavior. Although self-regulatory focus is related to an impressive diversity of consumer behaviors (for an overview, see Higgins & Spiegel, 2004), previous research has not yet examined the relationship between this personality construct and one's perception of unethical consumer practices. Though, as the basis distinction between promotion and prevention-focused self-regulation appears to have a pervasive impact on human judgment, thought, and behavior (e.g., Aaker & Lee, 2001; Zhou & Pham, 2004), self-regulatory focus might offer potential for the study of consumer ethics. Further, if a relationship between self-regulatory focus and consumer ethics is found, this result might be of practical relevance as self-regulatory focus not only varies across individuals (i.e., self-regulatory focus as a personality trait) but can also be situationally induced (e.g., Friedman & Förster, 2001; Roney, Higgins, & Shah, 1995). Moreover, if people's chronic self-regulatory focus is not known to

those who want to influence people's ethical decision making, self-regulatory focus can be inferred through other, more easy to infer characteristics, such as individuals' cultural background (Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000) or professional occupation (Förster, Higgins, & Bianco, 2003).

### **3. Theoretical Background: Self-Regulatory Focus**

Consumers' decisions take place in a context of goals they are striving for, needs they want to accomplish, and drives that color their thoughts (Pham & Higgins, 2005). Self-regulation refers to these processes individuals use to set their goals, choose means to achieve these goals, and assess progress toward these goals (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998). Building on the hedonic principle which entails that people approach pleasure and avoid pain, Higgins' regulatory focus theory (1997, 1998) posits that two distinct motivational orientations, shown by bio psychologists to have distinct physiological bases (e.g., Gray, 1990), regulate this goal-directed behavior. These two types of regulatory foci are labelled as promotion focus and prevention focus. Both foci relate to distinct types of needs, desired end states, and strategic inclinations.

Concerning the distinct types of needs, regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998) states that the promotion and the prevention system each serve a distinct survival function. More specifically, the theory proposes that individuals' behavior is guided by a need for nurturance in a promotion-focused mode of self-regulation. Within the prevention system, individuals' actions are guided by a need for security.

A second difference between the promotion focus and the prevention focus are the distinct types of desired end states. Although there are many ways of classifying goals (e.g., Huffman, Ratneshwar, & Mick, 2000), Higgins (1987) distinguishes between two types. On the one hand, he discerns ideals which refer to hopes, wishes, and aspirations that one would like to achieve and strive for (e.g., dreaming of an adventurous vacation). On the other hand, he distinguishes oughts which refer to people's obligations, duties, and responsibilities (e.g., having to provide for a child's education). Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998) suggests that ideals tap into the promotion system while oughts tap into the prevention system.

The promotion and the prevention system are not only different in the needs (nurturance versus security) and the goals (ideals versus oughts) they regulate, but also in terms of the strategic inclinations they invoke to fulfil these needs and goals (Pham & Avnet, 2004; Pham & Higgins, 2005). Both promotion and prevention strategies enable one to decrease the discrepancy between the current state and the desired outcome, but use different means to accomplish this. A promotion focus is captured by an approach-oriented strategy. These eagerness means are concerned with the avoidance of errors of omission (i.e., missing an emerging opportunity to accomplish something) and as a result involve achievement through immediate action rather than reflective deliberation. In line with this, promotion-focused individuals think in terms of gains versus non-gains (e.g., Roney et al., 1995; Shah, Higgins, & Friedman, 1998) and show a high sensitivity to the presence and absence of positive outcomes. In addition, success reflecting the presence of positive outcomes results in cheerfulness-related emotions (e.g., feeling satisfied), while failure reflecting the absence of positive outcomes results in dejection-related emotions (e.g., feeling disappointed; Shah & Higgins, 2001).

In contrast, a prevention focus is captured by an avoidance-oriented strategy. These vigilance means generate cognitive or behavioral courses that avoid errors of commission (i.e., making mistakes). As a result, prevention focus strategies involve careful assessment of the social context and action consequences. In line with this, prevention-focused individuals tend to frame goal pursuits and outcomes in terms of losses versus non-losses (e.g., Roney et al., 1995; Shah et al., 1998) and are highly sensitive to the presence and absence of negative outcomes. Whereas success reflecting the absence of negative outcomes results in quiescence-related emotions (e.g., feeling calm), failure reflecting the presence of negative outcomes results in agitation-related emotions (e.g., feeling tense; Shah & Higgins, 2001).

Research considers these two foci to develop since childhood, deriving from parents' different styles in terms of regulation (Higgins & Silberman, 1998). Parents stressing positive outcomes by, for example, commending the child when s/he acts desirable (while not commending the child when s/he does not behave desirable) brings about a promotion focus. In contrast, parents' focus on negative outcomes by, for example, penalizing the child when s/he acts undesirable (and not penalizing when s/he does not behave undesirable) causes a prevention focus. Research assumes that these two foci



underlie people's perspectives about what they consider significant in their lives (Carmona, Buunk, Dijkstra, & Peiro, 2008) and have a major impact on people's feelings, thoughts, and actions (Higgins, 1998). A considerable amount of empirical evidence supports the major tenets of regulatory focus theory (see for example Higgins, 1997, 1998).

Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998) posits that an individual's specific focus can vary across situations (e.g., Friedman & Förster, 2001; Shah et al., 1998). Whether an individual actually uses the promotion or the prevention strategy might thus depend on which self-regulation system is temporarily induced in momentary situations. However, and important for this study, self-regulatory focus can also vary across individuals. In other words, individuals may differ in their chronic or habitual self-regulatory orientations (Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994). Further, as proposed by regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998), promotion focus and prevention focus are distinct constructs or continuums rather than ends of a single continuum as other research's experimental designs often depict and operationalize (Wu, McMullen, Neubert, & Yi, 2008). Consequently, although one system may be chronically more accessible than the other in a given person, research assumes that both self-regulatory foci co-exist in every individual (Zhou & Pham, 2004). The present study constructs separate hypotheses for the two self-regulatory foci as people's chronic promotion and prevention orientations are theoretically independent. That is, individuals can be high in promotion focus only, high in prevention focus only, high in both, or low in both (Pham & Higgins, 2005).

#### **4. Hypotheses**

Under a promotion focus, the individual's strategic inclination is to approach matches to end states s/he would like to achieve (Higgins, 1999). Such individuals are motivated to use eagerness means to ensure hits (representing gains; i.e., looking for means of advancement), and to ensure against errors of omission or "misses" (representing non-gains; i.e., not closing off possibilities) (Higgins et al., 2001). This eager drive of capturing as many existing opportunities as possible (Higgins, 1998) entails greater risk taking (i.e., risky bias) (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Förster et al.,

2003; Higgins, 1998; Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999) which relates to lower ethical beliefs (Rallapalli, Vitell, Wiebe, & Barnes, 1994).

When individuals have a promotion focus, they are open to change (Liberman et al., 1999), resulting in an orientation of “open mindedness” and a preference for openness to change (Dholakia, Gopinath, Bagozzi, & Natarajan, 2006). Valuing openness to change (compared to valuing such openness less) is more likely to correspond with an unethical disposition as questionable consumer practices might give the opportunity to explore variety and stimulation through change from fixed patterns. Compared to individuals preferring conservation, individuals with an open mind will more easily slip into unethical behavior on the condition that this behavior forms a way of experiencing change and quickly approaching one’s desired end state. When openness to change is important to an individual’s life, s/he is more likely to let her/his life be guided by the excitement of experiencing and discovering opportunities (which sometimes might be more unethical) rather than by customs, traditions, and standards (which are more likely to ensure ethical behavior). In line with this reasoning, a recent study of Steenhaut and Van Kenhove (2006) shows that valuing openness to change results in a more tolerant judgment of unethical consumer practices. Therefore, we expect that consumers being high (versus low) in promotion are more likely to evaluate questionable consumer actions as appropriate.

Promotion focus strategies involve goal pursuit in a wilful or approach-oriented manner in which achievement is more likely to be reached by immediate action rather than reflective deliberation (e.g., of the social context, of the prevailing norms and standards). We are not suggesting that people with a high score on promotion have an ideal end state that is less than ideal (being unethical); only they will be more likely, when necessary, to use less ethical means to ensure these ideal end states. Based upon all these findings, we expect that (as we believe there is no reason to expect different results with regard to the different dimensions of ethical beliefs, we formulate one hypothesis instead of one hypothesis for each dimension of the Consumer Ethics Scale (Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992, 2005):

Hypothesis 1: Individuals scoring higher on promotion are more likely to tolerate unethical consumer practices compared to individuals scoring lower on promotion.

People with a prevention focus are strategically inclined to avoid mismatches to desired end states (i.e., oughts, obligations, duties; Higgins, 1999). This inclination results in a motivation to use vigilance means to ensure “correct rejections” (representing non-losses; i.e., be careful) and to ensure against errors of commission or “false alarms” (representing losses; i.e., avoid mistakes) (Higgins et al., 2001). This vigilant drive of protecting against potential mistakes or threats (Higgins, 1998), in turn, ends up with being less open to risk (i.e., a conservative bias) (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Förster et al., 2003; Higgins, 1998; Liberman et al., 1999). Previous research demonstrates that such lower risk propensity is related to higher ethical beliefs (i.e., more likely to believe that questionable consumer practices are unacceptable; Rallapalli et al., 1994). This is a first reason why we hypothesize that prevention is positively related to consumer ethical beliefs. That is, the higher one’s score on prevention, the more likely this individual is to not tolerate questionable consumer practices.

In addition, prevention focused people are likely to frame their desired end states in terms of oughts, obligations, and duties which are more likely to be achieved when following the prevailing norms and standards. Similarly, individuals with a prevention focus fixate on stability and status quo (Liberman et al., 1999). Such stability preference has the potential benefit of safety and security, which individuals with a prevention focus prefer (Liberman et al., 1999). As a consequence of this stability preference, prevention-focused individuals show inclinations toward careful and routine ways of thinking (Förster & Higgins, 2005; Friedman & Förster, 2001; Liberman et al., 1999; Liberman, Molden, Idson, & Higgins, 2001; Seibt & Förster, 2004; Semin, Higgins, de Montes, Estourget, & Valencia, 2005; Zhu & Myers-Levy, 2007). When such conservation is important to an individual’s life, s/he is more likely to let her/his life be guided by customs, traditions, and standards rather than changes from fixed patterns. Steenhaut and Van Kenhove (2006) show that valuing conservation results in a more intolerant judgment of unethical consumer practices.

Further, prevention-focused individuals are particularly sensitive to and vigilant about (the violation of) normative standards (Keller, Hurst, & Uskul, 2008). Before acting, they carefully assess

the social context and actual consequences, with normative expectations guiding their behavior. We want to make clear that in the present chapter, we do not suggest that individuals with a strong prevention focus desire to be more ethical than those with a lower prevention focus (i.e., ethicality as part of their ideal end state); only, we expect these prevention focused people to be less likely to use unethical means to achieve their ideal end states. Achieving the ideal end state being equal to oughts, obligations, and duties is often more easily reached when following the prevailing (moral) norms and standards.

Based on all these findings, we put forward the following hypothesis (as we believe there is no reason to expect different results with regard to the different dimensions of ethical beliefs, we formulate one hypothesis instead of one hypothesis for each dimension of the Consumer Ethics Scale (Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992, 2005):

Hypothesis 2: Individuals scoring higher on prevention are less likely to tolerate unethical consumer practices compared to individuals scoring lower on prevention.

## **5. Study 1**

### ***5.1. Methodology***

#### ***5.1.1. Sample***

Data were collected in two phases, separated by a period of about two weeks. In a first phase of data gathering, undergraduate students fill in a self-administered online questionnaire. The authors inform them about the fact that this research would consist of two unconnected parts of interrogation (cf. psychological separation; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2003) which would take place at different points in time. The first part of the research consists of questions about self-regulatory focus. After two weeks, all the participants ( $N = 594$ ) of the first phase get an invitation to respond to another questionnaire with the goal of examining their consumer ethical beliefs. In total, 452 students

(response rate: 76.1%), ranging in age from 17 to 26 years ( $M = 20$ ,  $SD = 1.85$ ), participate in the second research part (258 females). We opt for this temporal separation of measurement of the predictor (i.e., self-regulatory focus) and criterion variable (i.e., consumer ethical beliefs) to control for common method bias. That is, asking about one's self-regulatory focus may make these foci more salient to the respondents, which could ultimately lead to an artifactual covariation of the two constructs under investigation (i.e., self-regulatory focus and consumer ethical beliefs) (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

### *5.1.2. Measures*

#### *Independent Variables*

A reliable and valid Dutch version of Carver and White's (1994) BIS/BAS Scales (Franken, Muris, & Rassin, 2005) assesses participants' chronic self-regulatory foci. The Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS) and the Behavioral Activation System (BAS) are two general motivation systems that underlie affect and behavior (Gray, 1990). The BIS controls the experience of anxiety in response to anxiety-relevant cues, and is particularly sensitive to signals of punishment and the presence or absence of negative outcomes. The BAS controls the experience of such positive feelings as satisfaction and happiness when a person is exposed to cues of impending reward, and of such negative feelings as sadness and frustration when the reward is unattainable (Carver, 2004; Carver & White, 1994). In addition, the BAS is specifically sensitive to signals of reward as well as to the general presence or absence of positive outcomes. These definitions reflect the core features of the prevention focus and the promotion focus, respectively (Carver, 1996; Carver & White, 1994; Higgins et al., 1994). Therefore, we use the BIS/BAS Scales, which became one of the established ways of investigating self-regulatory focus, as indicators of chronic availability of prevention and promotion foci (cf. Dholakia et al., 2006; Lauriola, Russo, Lucidi, Violani, & Levin, 2005; Leone, Perugini, & Bagozzi, 2005; Mann, Sherman, & Updegraff, 2004).

The BIS subscale, used to operationalize prevention focus, consists of seven items (e.g., 'I worry about making mistakes'). Three subscales refer to different BAS facets which this study uses to

measure promotion focus: Reward Responsiveness (five items; e.g., ‘When I see an opportunity for something, I get excited right away’), Drive (four items; e.g., ‘When I go after something I want, I move on it right away’), and Fun Seeking (four items; e.g., ‘I will often do things for no other reason than they might be fun’). To get an overview of the BIS/BAS items, see *Appendix A* (i.e., original BIS/BAS Scales; Carver & White, 1994) and *Appendix B* (i.e., valid Dutch version of BIS/BAS Scales; Franken et al., 2005). In the remainder of this chapter, we speak about prevention and promotion instead of BIS and BAS respectively.

Respondents indicate the extent to which they endorse the different statements reflecting promotion and prevention goals on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Both subscales are reliable (prevention:  $\alpha = .83$ ; promotion:  $\alpha = .76$ ) and do not correlate with one another ( $r = .04$ ;  $p > .05$ ). Distinct promotion and prevention scores are calculated by averaging the items belonging to each of these subscales. As we expect no different results with regard to the three different BAS dimensions, we calculate the average of all the BAS items. Higher scores on the separate subscales indicate greater chronic-prevention and chronic-promotion goal orientations. This study treats the prevention ( $M = 5.2$ ;  $SD = .93$ ) and promotion ( $M = 5.1$ ;  $SD = .61$ ) scores as separate continuous variables in subsequent main analyses (cf. Yi & Baumgartner, 2008).

### *Dependent Variables*

We use the Consumer Ethics Scale (Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992; see *Chapter 1: Introduction*) to measure respondents’ ethical beliefs. In 2005, Vitell and Muncy updated their Consumer Ethics Scale by rewording and adding several new items that represent three distinct categories: (1) downloading/buying counterfeit goods, (2) recycling/environmental awareness, and (3) doing the right thing/doing good. In the present chapter, we are interested in unethical consumer behavior, and therefore exclude the latter two categories from this study. Further, we add two items involving the downloading of copyrighted materials and the buying of counterfeit goods to the ‘no harm/no foul’ dimension (cf. Vitell, Singh, & Paolillo, 2007). *Appendix C* reports the English items of this scale. *Appendix D* reports the Dutch version of this scale.

Respondents indicate how acceptable they think the various unethical consumer practices to be on a seven-point Likert scale going from ‘completely unacceptable’ to ‘completely acceptable’. Higher scores thus indicate a more tolerant view. The reliabilities of the four dependent dimensions are as follows: ‘actively benefiting from illegal activities’ (five items;  $\alpha = .65$ ), ‘passively benefiting at the expense of others’ (six items;  $\alpha = .70$ ), ‘actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices’ (five items;  $\alpha = .65$ ), and ‘no harm/no foul’ (eight items;  $\alpha = .79$ ). We sum the appropriate items within each dimension to come up with one single numeric value for each of the four dimensions. Descriptive statistics show that respondents generally judge the practices of the ‘actively benefiting from illegal activities’ dimension to be the least acceptable ( $M = 2.7$ ,  $SD = .82$ ). On the other hand, participants tolerate the ‘no harm/no foul’ activities the most ( $M = 5.3$ ,  $SD = .82$ ). Respondents judge the activities of the active/legal dimension ( $M = 3.7$ ,  $SD = .93$ ) more harshly than those of the passive dimension ( $M = 4.5$ ,  $SD = .89$ ).

## **5.2. Results**

We use regression analysis to analyse the data and to test the hypotheses with promotion and prevention as independent variables and the four dimensions of the Consumer Ethics Scale (Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992; 2005; i.e., ‘Actively benefiting from illegal activities’ (Active/Illegal), ‘Passively benefiting at the expense of others’ (Passive), ‘Actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices’ (Active/Legal), and ‘No harm/No foul’ (No harm/No foul)) as dependent variables. *Table 1*<sup>1</sup> presents the correlation matrix for all these variables.

*Table 1**Study 1: Correlations between variables used in regressions*

Construct	1	2	3	4	5
1. Active/Illegal					
2. Passive	.47***				
3. Active/Legal	.62***	.53***			
4. No harm/No foul	.34***	.48***	.42***		
5. Promotion	.10*	.11*	.11*	.13**	
6. Prevention	-.18***	-.15**	-.18***	-.03	.04

$N = 452$ ; \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

In order to examine the relationships between the independent variables and each of the four dependent variables, we conduct four separate regression analyses of which the results are shown in *Table 2*. This table clearly indicates that respondents' self-regulatory focus significantly explains their perception of morally dubious consumer practices (i.e., consumer ethical beliefs), with prevention being the sole exception with regard to the 'no harm/no foul' dimension. The signs of the respective beta weights are all in the expected direction (i.e., negative for prevention and positive for promotion). That is, the stronger (versus weaker) respondents' promotion focus, the more likely they are to judge the questionable consumer practices less harshly. In contrast, the stronger (versus weaker) respondents' prevention focus, the more likely they are to not tolerate these activities. Consequently, these findings support Hypotheses 1 and 2. However, results do not confirm our expectations concerning the negative relationship between prevention and the 'no harm/no foul' dimension. This insignificant relationship may exist because respondents may not perceive any of these items to be harmful at all. This finding would be consistent with previous research as the 'no harm' label for this dimension indicates. However, following this line of reasoning would bring along that promotion would not significantly explain respondents' ethical judgments of the 'no harm/no foul' activities, which is not the case in this study.



Table 2

Study 1: Results of regression analyses

	Dependent variable			
	Active/Illegal	Passive	Active/Legal	No harm/No foul
Promotion	.10*	.12*	.12*	.13**
Prevention	-.18***	-.16**	-.18***	-.036
R <sup>2</sup>	.04	.04	.05	.02
F-value	9.92***	8.55***	10.48***	4.23*

$N = 452$ ; \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

## 6. Study 2

In the past, many studies examining consumer ethics use student samples since they represent an important segment of consumers for many marketers (Chan, Wong, & Leung, 1998; Higgs-Kleyn, 1998; Muncy & Eastman, 1998; Rallapalli et al., 1994). Because of the essentially exploratory nature of this research, and because the items of the measurement scales are relevant to the respondents who answer them, using a student sample forms no serious limitation for this study (Ferber, 1977). However, a restriction of this sampling frame is that caution should be taken in trying to generalize the findings to other samples. Therefore, we want to investigate whether the results of the first study hold when using a sample drawn from a more general population.

### 6.1. Methodology

The methodology of the second study is exactly the same as the one used in the first study among students (cf. *supra*). In total, 254 respondents participate in the second study. Table 3 provides an overview of the characteristics of this sample.

*Table 3*  
*Study 2: Sample characteristics*

<u>Gender</u>	Male	40.9%
	Female	59.1%
<u>Age</u>	≤24	2.8%
	25-34	41.7%
	35-44	20.9%
	45-54	19.3%
	55+	15.3%
<u>Education</u>	Primary education	1.2%
	Lower secondary education	2.4%
	Higher secondary education	16.5%
	Higher (non-university) education	39.8%
	Higher university education	35.4%
	Postgraduate education	4.7%
<u>Income</u>	< 500 euro	3.1%
	500 - 1499 euro	26.0%
	1500 - 2499 euro	46.1%
	2500 - 3499 euro	13.0%
	≥ 3500	5.1%
	I'd rather not say this	6.7%

*N* = 254

## **6.2. Results**

*Table 4* gives an overview of the reliabilities, mean scores, and standard deviations of promotion, prevention, and the four dimensions of the Consumer Ethics Scale (Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992, 2005). Similar to our first study, these statistics show that respondents generally judge the practices of the ‘actively benefiting from illegal activities’ dimension most harshly, while they tolerate the ‘no harm/no foul’ activities the most. Further, respondents again perceive the activities of the active/legal dimension to be more unacceptable than those of the passive dimension.

Table 4

Study 2: Number of items, reliabilities, means and standards deviations of variables used in regressions

Construct	# items	Alpha	M	SD
1. Active/Illegal	5	.71	2.1	.76
2. Passive	6	.75	3.7	1.03
3. Active/Legal	5	.68	3.4	1.05
4. No harm/No foul	8	.77	4.7	.91
5. Promotion	13	.83	5.0	.73
6. Prevention	7	.79	5.2	.82

N = 254

Table 5 presents the correlation matrix for both the independent and dependent variables.

Table 5

Study 2: Correlations between variables used in regressions

Construct	1	2	3	4	5
1. Active/Illegal					
2. Passive	.59***				
3. Active/Legal	.63***	.67***			
4. No harm/No foul	.37***	.52***	.52***		
5. Promotion	.16*	.17**	.16*	.18**	
6. Prevention	-.22**	-.21**	-.18**	-.05	.09

N = 254; \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Similar to the findings of Study 1, results (see Table 6) indicate that respondents being high in promotion judge unethical consumer practices less harshly compared to respondents being low in promotion. Further, we find that high prevention-focused individuals tolerate unethical consumer practices less than low prevention-focused individuals. Consequently, these findings support

Hypotheses 1 and 2. There is, however, one exception. As in the first study, results indicate an insignificant relationship between prevention and the ‘no harm/no foul’ dimension.

*Table 6*

*Study 2: Results of regression analyses*

	Dependent variable			
	Active/Illegal	Passive	Active/Legal	No harm/No foul
Promotion	.18**	.19**	.17**	.18**
Prevention	-.23***	-.22***	-.19**	-.06
R <sup>2</sup>	.08	.08	.06	.03
F-value	10.85***	10.37***	8.03***	4.48*

$N = 254$ ; \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

As already mentioned before in this chapter, Higgins (1997, 1998) postulates that promotion focus and prevention focus are theoretically independent constructs, rather than the extremes of a single motivational continuum. Therefore, we developed separate hypotheses for the two self-regulatory foci. Hypothesis 1 states that individuals scoring higher (versus lower) on promotion are more likely to tolerate unethical consumer practices while Hypothesis 2 postulates that individuals scoring higher (versus lower) on prevention are less likely to tolerate unethical consumer practices. One might question what happens with individuals’ ethical beliefs if these individuals score high on both promotion focus and prevention focus. This would, based on both hypotheses, mean that one holds higher *and* lower ethical beliefs at the same time.

To tackle this particular issue, we assessed respondents’ dominant self-regulatory focus. In case their promotion focus score was higher than their prevention focus score, respondents were attributed to a dominant promotion focus. In case respondents’ prevention focus score was higher than their promotion focus score, they were attributed to a dominant prevention focus. One respondent had identical scores on both foci and was excluded from the analyses. The results of the Independent Samples T-tests show a significant difference between a dominant promotion focus and a dominant

prevention focus for all the dimensions of the Consumer Ethics Scale (see *Table 7*). More specifically, individuals with a dominant promotion focus judge the various questionable consumer practices less harshly compared to the individuals with a dominant prevention focus.

*Table 7*

*Study 2: Results of T-tests*

	Prevention ( <i>N</i> = 149)		Promotion ( <i>N</i> = 104)				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i> -value
Active/Illegal	1.95	.72	2.33	.78	-4.00	251	.000
Passive	3.48	1.03	3.94	.99	-3.60	251	.000
Active/Legal	3.21	1.05	3.61	1.02	-2.97	251	.003
No harm/No foul	4.58	.86	4.87	.96	-2.47	251	.014

*N* = 253

## 7. Discussion

Both studies described in this chapter examine the impact of self-regulatory focus (Higgins, 1997, 1998) on individuals' judgment of unethical consumer practices (i.e., consumer ethical beliefs). Study 1 uses a student sample, while Study 2 makes use of a sample drawn from a more general population. Both studies indicate that promotion affects one's attitude toward questionable consumer practices: Those having a stronger (versus weaker) promotion focus are more likely to judge consumer misbehaviors less harshly. Further, both studies show that prevention influences one's perception of morally dubious consumer practices with those having a stronger (versus weaker) prevention focus being more inclined to judge these questionable activities more harshly.

This study contributes to the marketing ethics field. In this latter area of research, most attention to date focuses on the morality of business and marketing practices (Fukukawa, 2003; Schlegelmilch & Robertson, 1995; Vitell et al., 2001). However, marketing is an exchange process between buyers and sellers who both might be subject to ethical lapses (Rao & Al-Wugayan, 2005). Consumers are also a major part of the sales transaction dyad and ignoring them in ethics research

may result in an inadequate understanding of that process (Swaidan, Vitell, & Rawwas, 2003; Vitell, 2003) and in the development of ineffective marketing strategies (Swaidan, Rawwas, & Al-Khatib, 2004). By examining perceptions of unethical *consumer* practices, both studies described in this chapter fill this ‘consumer ethics gap’ in marketing ethics literature. Further, this study also meets the more general and recent call for research into deviant consumer behavior (e.g., Fullerton & Punj, 2004; Harris & Ogbonna, 2002).

Another contribution of these studies is that they address the need expressed by recent research to examine the range of antecedents of dysfunctional consumer behavior (e.g., Al-Rafee & Cronan, 2006; Fullerton & Punj, 2004; Vitell, 2003). By investigating the relationship between self-regulatory focus and consumer ethical beliefs, we also add to the knowledge surrounding regulatory focus. In the course of its existence, regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998) has proven to be highly influential. This framework of motivational processes applies to an impressively wide spectrum of topics and psychological phenomena across many different domains (for an overview, see Higgins & Spiegel, 2004). Despite the wide relevance of the regulatory focus theory, no previous studies have examined the consequences of a promotion and a prevention focus for individuals’ perceptions of questionable consumer practices. Even less attention has been devoted to these regulatory systems in marketing (e.g., Aaker & Lee, 2001; Andrade, 2005; Cohen & Andrade, 2004; Kidwell, Hardesty, & Childers, 2008). This makes the present study of interest to marketing theorists. As Reynolds and Harris (2009) state, there exists a tendency within research fields to stay within the own literature boundaries. However, creating new insights into phenomena with a rich but diverse research tradition like unethical consumer behavior necessitates enrichment by delving into the wide existing array of perspectives and positions.

This study is also of practical relevance. As a focus for research, consumer ethics has the benefit of generating a better understanding of why consumers engage in unethical behavior (Vitell & Paolillo, 2003). Answering this question can help to limit consumer misbehavior in the marketplace which often poses a significant cost to business (Rawwas & Singhapakdi, 1998). An increased insight into the factors that relate to unethical consumer behavior enables to design systems, structures, and priorities calculated to lower misbehavior (Reynolds & Harris, 2009). Suppose, for example, that the

movie industry wants to launch a movie message to decrease digital piracy behavior. As the two self-regulatory foci can be situationally induced (e.g., Friedman & Förster, 2001; Roney et al., 1995), it might be useful to make the prevention focus salient within this message (e.g., individuals facing the contingency of suffering or avoiding punishment) as both studies show that high prevention relates to greater ethicality.

Another ‘practical advantage’ of self-regulatory focus is that this personality variable can be assessed by other, more easy to infer characteristics. For instance, previous research shows that people living in Western cultures, due to their dominant independent self-construal, are more likely to hold a promotion focus. People living in Eastern cultures, on the other hand, are more likely to be prevention oriented due to their dominant interdependent self-construal (Lee et al., 2000).

### ***7.1. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research***

We want to end this chapter by pointing to some limitations and suggestions for further research. In both studies, a restriction concerns the limited percentage of variance that the independent variables explain for each dimension of the Consumer Ethics Scale (Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992, 2005). Actually, various studies claim that personality variables often fail to explain more than ten percent of the variance in behavior (e.g., Kassirjian, Olsen, & Sims, 1981). In this way, our study is no exception. Obviously, other constructs not included in this study may account for the rest of this variance. As a matter of fact, a lot of variables could intervene between the ‘stage’ of self-regulatory focus (which is something quite ‘abstract’ and deeply routed within a person) and consumer ethical beliefs (which forms a more concrete ‘phase’ in the ethical decision making process). Unravelling the processes that lie behind this interrelationship would be a research endeavor.

Second, in the theoretical background section, we made clear that a prevention focus fosters a strategic inclination to avoid mismatches to desired end states. Based on this reasoning, we might expect that prevention focused individuals become more likely to behave unethical if this unethical behavior is the only way or a more easy way to achieve a desired end state or to avoid such mismatches to desired end states. Suggesting that prevention focused individuals are more ethical

compared to promotion focused individuals might oversimplify the relationship between self-regulatory focus and consumer ethics. Consequently, it would be worthwhile for future research to dig deeper into this particular issue and to establish possible boundary conditions.

Previous research demonstrates that promotion focused people are more likely to show extreme response styles on self-reported measures while prevention focused people are more likely to show midpoint response styles (Cabooter, 2010). Therefore, it might be that the results described in the present chapter are due to people's tendency toward certain response styles rather than their ethical predisposition. Consequently, it is necessary that future research investigates the extent to which the results in the present chapter are distorted by stylistic responding. Further studies might control for such responding or could correct for response styles. Another way of avoiding this possible distortion would be to situationally induce self-regulatory focus and to measure real ethical behavior instead of using self-reported measures to assess one's self-regulatory focus and ethicality.

Third, the BIS/BAS Scales (Carver & White, 1994) or other established ways of assessing self-regulatory focus (e.g., Higgins et al., 2001; Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002) have a restriction in that they are self-reported measures. Consequently, the degree to which respondents possess insight into their own motivational state and experiences limits the use of these scales (Summerville & Roese, 2008). Instead of these multi-item measurement scales, future research might use different tests that distinguish well among a promotion and a prevention focus. Examples are the speed/accuracy test (Förster et al., 2003), choice test (Wang & Lee, 2006), determination task (Lieberman et al., 1999), and gift task (Lieberman et al., 1999). These tasks are beneficial as participants do not need good knowledge about their own self-regulatory focus. In addition, respondents are not aware of the real intention of these tests. Further, the use of such tests allows to control for respondents' likeliness to respond in accordance with certain response styles (see limitation in the paragraph above).

Finally, future studies investigating the interrelationship between self-regulatory focus and consumer ethics might include a behavioral aspect or at least behavioral intentions into their research design. Just like almost all previous consumer ethics studies, the reported studies use ethical beliefs as a proxy for intentions and behavior, theorizing that these ethical evaluations influence consumers' (intentions) to engage in morally dubious practices. However, factors other than ethical beliefs are



likely to have an impact on unethical behavior (Vitell, 2003). Moreover, next to using various tests that are not based on self-reported measurements to distinguish between a promotion and prevention focus, the use of behavioral measures allows to control for respondents' propensity to stylistic responding.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> With regard to *Tables 1, 2, 5, and 6*, we would like to make clear that, rather than running a full structural model and thus including control variables, we ran regression analyses without taking into account any control variable. Consequently, the lines in *Tables 1 and 2*, as well as in *Tables 5 and 6*, are quite overlapping.

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## 9. Appendices

### 9.1. Appendix A: BIS/BAS Scales

#### *BIS*

1. I worry about making mistakes
2. I feel worried when I think I have done poorly at something
3. I feel pretty worried or upset when I think or know somebody is angry at me
4. I have very few fears compared to my friends®
5. If I think something unpleasant is going to happen, I usually get pretty “worked up”
6. Even if something bad is about to happen to me, I rarely experience fear or nervousness®
7. Criticism or scolding hurts me quite a bit

#### *BAS-Reward*

1. When good things happen to me, it affects me strongly
2. When I’m doing well at something, I love to keep at it
3. When I get something I want, I feel excited right away
4. When I see an opportunity for something, I get excited right away
5. It would excite me to win a contest

#### *BAS-Drive*

1. When I go after something I want, I move on it right away
2. When I want something, I usually go all-out to get it
3. I go out of my way to get things I want
4. If I see a chance to get something, I use a “no holds barred” approach

*BAS-Fun*

1. I will often do things for no other reason than they might be fun
2. I often act on the spur of the moment
3. I crave excitement and new sensations
4. I'm always willing to try something new if I think it will be fun

® Reverse scored item

## ***9.2. Appendix B: Dutch Version BIS/BAS Scales***

### *BIS*

1. Ik pieker wel eens over het maken van fouten
2. Ik voel me bezorgd als ik denk dat ik slecht heb gepresteerd
3. Ik voel me bezorgd of overstuur als ik denk of weet dat iemand boos op mij is
4. Ik ervaar weinig angsten vergeleken met mijn vrienden®
5. Ik raak enigszins gestrest als ik denk dat er iets vervelends staat te gebeuren
6. Ik voel zelden angst of zenuwen, zelfs als me iets vervelends staat te wachten®
7. Kritiek of uitbranders raken mij behoorlijk

### *BAS-Reward*

1. Als ik iets leuks meemaak, heeft dat duidelijk invloed op me
2. Als ik iets goed doe, wil ik er graag mee doorgaan
3. Als ik iets krijg wat ik wil, voel ik me opgewonden en energiek
4. Als ik ergens een buitenkansje zie dan word ik meteen enthousiast
5. Als ik een wedstrijd zou winnen, zou ik erg enthousiast zijn

### *BAS-Drive*

1. Als ik de kans zie iets te krijgen wat ik wil, zal ik die kans meteen grijpen
2. Als ik iets wil, zal ik er gewoonlijk alles voor doen om dit te krijgen
3. Ik zal mijn grenzen overschrijden om de dingen te krijgen die ik wil
4. Als ik iets van plan ben dan laat ik mij door niets weerhouden

*BAS-Fun*

1. Vaak doe ik dingen alleen voor de lol
2. Ik doe vaak dingen in een vlaag van opwelling
3. Ik verlang naar spanning en sensatie
4. Ik ben altijd bereid iets nieuws te proberen als ik denk dat het leuk zal zijn

® Reverse scored item

### ***9.3. Appendix C: Consumer Ethics Scale***

#### *Actively benefiting from illegal activities*

1. Changing price tags on merchandise in a retail store
2. Drinking a can of soda in a supermarket without paying for it
3. Reporting a lost item as “stolen” to an insurance company in order to collect the insurance money
4. Giving misleading price information to a clerk for an unpriced item
5. Returning damaged goods when the damage was your own fault

#### *Passively benefiting at the expense of others*

1. Getting too much change and not saying anything
2. Moving into a new residence, finding the cable TV is still hooked up, and using it (rather than signing up and) (without) paying for it
3. Lying about a child’s age in order to get a lower price
4. Not saying anything when the waiter or waitress miscalculates a bill in your favour
5. Joining a CD club just to get some free CD’s, with no intention of buying any
6. Observing someone shoplifting and ignoring it

#### *Actively benefiting from deceptive ( or questionable) practices*

1. Using an expired coupon for merchandise
2. Stretching the truth on an income tax return
3. Not telling the truth when negotiating the price of a new automobile
4. Using a coupon for merchandise you did not buy
5. Returning merchandise to a store by claiming that it was a gift when it was not

*No harm/no foul*

1. Taping a movie off the television
2. Copying computer software or games that you did not buy
3. Installing software on your computer without buying it
4. “Burning” a CD instead of buying it
5. Returning merchandise after trying it and not liking it
6. Spending over an hour trying on clothing and not buying anything
7. Downloading music from the Internet instead of buying it
8. Buying counterfeit goods instead of buying the original manufacturers’ brands

#### ***9.4. Appendix D: Dutch Translation Consumer Ethics Scale***

##### *Actively benefiting from illegal activities*

1. Het prijsetiket van een product in de winkel veranderen
2. Een blikje frisdrank uit het winkelrek nemen en uitdrinken zonder ervoor te betalen
3. Een voorwerp dat je verloren hebt als gestolen aangeven aan de verzekering, om het geld te krijgen
4. Doelbewust een lagere prijs zeggen tegen een kassierster die je vraagt hoeveel een ongeprijsd product kost
5. Een product dat je zelf hebt beschadigd gratis proberen omruilen, zeggende dat het reeds beschadigd was

##### *Passively benefiting at the expense of others*

1. Teveel wisselgeld terugkrijgen aan de kassa en niets zeggen
2. Verhuizen naar een nieuwe woonplaats, opmerken dat de kabeltelevisie nog steeds is aangesloten en er gebruik van maken zonder ervoor te betalen
3. Liegen over de leeftijd van een kind om een lagere prijs te krijgen
4. Niets zeggen wanneer de ober zich in jouw voordeel vergist in de rekening
5. Lid worden van een cd-club enkel om wat cd's gratis te krijgen, maar zonder enige intentie om cd's te kopen
6. Iemand zien stelen in de winkel en dit niet melden

##### *Actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices*

1. Een kortingsbon gebruiken die niet meer geldig is
2. Je belastingsformulier fout invullen om zo minder belastingen te moeten betalen



3. Niet de waarheid vertellen wanneer je onderhandelt over de prijs van een nieuwe wagen
4. Een kortingsbon gebruiken voor een product dat je niet gekocht hebt
5. Een product terugbrengen naar de winkel met het excuus dat het een geschenk was, terwijl dit niet zo is

*No harm/no foul*

1. Een film opnemen die op tv wordt uitgezonden
2. Computersoftware of spelletjes kopiëren die je zelf niet gekocht hebt
3. Software op je computer installeren zonder hiervoor te betalen
4. Een cd kopiëren in plaats van deze aan te kopen
5. Een product dat je uitprobeerde, inruilen omdat je er niet van houdt
6. Een uur kleren passen in een winkel en uiteindelijk niets kopen
7. Muziek downloaden van het internet in plaats van deze aan te kopen
8. Bewust nagemaakte producten kopen in plaats van de merken van de oorspronkelijke fabrikant te kopen



## **Chapter 3:**

### **When Colors Backfire: The Impact of Color Cues on Moral Judgment**

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A version of this chapter is currently under review as “De Bock, T., Pandelaere, M., & Van Kenhove, P. (2<sup>nd</sup> round). When colors backfire: The impact of color cues on moral judgment. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.”



## Chapter 3:

### When Colors Backfire: The Impact of Color Cues on Moral Judgment

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#### 1. Abstract

This chapter reports three studies that investigate if and how the valence of color cues affects evaluations of positively<sup>1</sup> and negatively valenced behavior. Study 1 and Study 2 use colors with definite differences in terms of valence, namely, red and green. Instead of using the colors red and green, Study 3 applies an evaluative conditioning paradigm to endow initially neutral colors with negative versus positive valences. Findings of all three studies show an ironic color effect: undesirable behaviors become less unacceptable when presented with negatively valenced colors. In general, respondents find (un)desirable behaviors more acceptable/less unacceptable when a background color is of the same valence rather than neutral or opposite in valence. Paradoxically, using colors with a negative valence (e.g., red) in campaigns that aim to prevent negatively valenced behavior may backfire, because this usage appears to render the undesirable behavior more acceptable.

Keywords: affective priming, color, fluency, intuition, moral judgment, moral psychology, persuasion

## 2. Introduction

Colors are ubiquitous. The objects, people, and environments we face daily all contain color information. As Mehta and Zhu (2009) remark: “color is a fundamental aspect of human perception” (p. 1226). Colors also entail more than just aesthetics in that they carry psychological meanings and associations. The current paper investigates if and how the valence of color cues might affect evaluations of positively<sup>1</sup> and negatively valenced behaviors. Intriguingly, our findings show an ironic color effect: using colors with a negative valence in campaigns aiming to prevent negatively valenced behavior may actually backfire as it renders the undesirable behavior less unacceptable.

This study contributes to several research lines. First, we add to the emerging stream of research on color functioning (e.g., Deng, Hui, & Hutchinson, 2010; Lindsey et al., 2010). Second, several studies document match effects, such that a match between a message cue and the message content exerts beneficial effects on judgment and persuasion (e.g., Cavazza, Graziani, Serpe, & Rubichi, 2010; Mayer & Tormala, 2010). This study instead reveals the potential detrimental effects of a valence match between a cue and a message on moral judgments. Third, moral judgments have traditionally been considered as the result of rational and deliberate reasoning processes (e.g., Jones, 1991; Kohlberg, 1976; Turiel, 1983). More recently, scholars have argued and showed that moral decision making is also influenced, if not dominated, by intuitive factors (e.g., Haidt, 2001; Meier, Robinson, & Clore, 2004). The current paper supports this latter argument by demonstrating the effect of seemingly irrelevant color cues on moral judgment. Fourth, this research identifies an important and ubiquitous source of conceptual fluency that has been previously overlooked, namely, fluency stemming from a *valence* match between a stimulus and its context, rather than from semantic priming.

Our findings are important for a host of settings. For example, marketers and policy makers attempt to develop messages that discourage undesirable behaviors, often by appeals to moral judgment and behavior. Such decision makers need to consider the effects of colors carefully, because they might assume a negative connotation color, such as red, to aid to deter people from a bad behavior, whereas these messages may inadvertently render the undesirable behavior less unacceptable.

Our findings also suggest that undesirable behavior, like petty crime, might be more likely if the physical environment prompts negative evaluations.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

In many situations, particular colors get paired with particular messages, concepts, and experiences (Elliot, Maier, Moller, Friedman, & Meinhardt, 2007). Through repeated pairings, people form strong color associations (Mehta & Zhu, 2009), such that the mere presence of a color in a situation can activate corresponding associations that influence affect, cognition, and behavior (Elliot, Maier, Binser, Friedman, & Pekrun, 2009). Research on grounded cognition (Barsalou, 2008) demonstrates that the act of perceiving a stimulus activates memory traces that in turn mentally stimulate actions associated with the stimulus and thus prompt corresponding thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Two colors that are of interest for written communication to indicate desirability or undesirability are green and red, respectively. Red, as typically associated with dangers and mistakes (e.g., traffic lights, stop signs, warning signals; Elliot et al., 2007; Smeesters & Liu, 2011), activates an avoidance motivation (Mehta & Zhu, 2009), making people more vigilant and risk averse (Friedman & Förster, 2002, 2005). Green contrasts chromatically and psychologically with red and offers general associations with approach motivations (Elliot & Maier, 2007). Briefly stated, colors that convey positive meanings (e.g., green) generally induce approach responses, whereas colors carrying negative meanings (e.g., red), induce avoidance responses.

It thus seems reasonable to argue that using the color red should enhance communications aimed at reducing unwanted behavior, while using green should improve campaigns aimed at inducing wanted behavior. Indeed, we conducted a pilot study in which participants indicated which color (i.e., red or green) they find more appropriate for campaigns aimed at stimulating good behavior ( $N = 45$ ) or deterring bad behavior ( $N = 46$ ). Results showed that 93% preferred green over red for stimulating good behavior and 80% preferred red over green for deterring bad behavior. In both cases, the observed percentages differ from indifference (i.e., 50%),  $z$ s  $> 5.19$ ,  $ps < .001$ .

Based on affective priming and conceptual fluency theory, this study suggests alternative predictions for the commonly held belief that negative (versus positive) color cues are better suited for messages to prevent negative behavior. Affective priming refers to the fact that people process targets faster and more accurately if they are preceded by primes with the same rather than an opposite valence (see Fazio, 2001; Klauer & Musch, 2003). For example, people identify the word *cancer* faster when it is preceded by the word *spider* than by the word *flower*. Affective priming even occurs when the prime and target appear simultaneously instead of sequentially (e.g., Spruyt, Hermans, De Houwer, Vandromme, & Eelen, 2007). Although affective priming studies generally use simple stimuli (i.e., single words or pictures of an easily identified object), this phenomenon may be relevant for more complex stimuli too.

In affective priming, a valenced prime is presumed to activate the corresponding valence which makes it easier to activate concepts with a similar valence (Fazio, 2001). Although never recognized as such, affective priming may thus imply a form of conceptual fluency, which arises when the mental representation of a stimulus is easy to activate because it offers semantic relatedness to the context in which it appears (Whittlesea, 1993). If we designate a background color as prime and an (un)desirable behavior as target, a valence match between the background color and the behavior might generate conceptual fluency. In the moral domain, a red background color entails a context that is associated with something bad. Consequently, one may experience conceptual fluency when processing a bad behavior described on a red background. A green background color, on the other hand, entails a context that is related to something good. Therefore, one may experience conceptual fluency when processing a good behavior described on a green background.

Such conceptual fluency represents a specific form of processing fluency. In general, experiencing processing fluency evokes a positive affective state that people misattribute to the stimuli they are processing rather than to the ease of processing (Winkielman, Schwarz, Fazendeiro, & Reber, 2003). For instance, people regard their childhood memories as more intact when they must recall four episodes from their childhood instead of twelve (Winkielman, Schwarz & Belli, 1998), presumably because retrieving just four episodes is easier than retrieving twelve episodes. This ease (versus



difficulty) during the retrieval task then gets attributed not to the task at hand but rather to the quality of childhood memory.

We similarly propose that people may view any given (un)desirable behavior as more positive/less negative if its valence matches the valence of the background on which it is described. So, we predict that a good behavior would be viewed as even more positive when described on a green (versus red) background while a bad behavior would be viewed as less negative when described on a red (versus green) background. In the case of prevention attempts in the moral domain, a message that attempts to discourage undesirable behavior may be less persuasive when it appears against a red (versus a green) background color. This line of reasoning also implies that promotions of desirable behavior could benefit from creating a positively (compared to a negatively) valenced context, such as by using a green background color. We test this idea in Study 1, focused on the context of music downloading.

## **4. Study 1**

### ***4.1. Participants and Procedure***

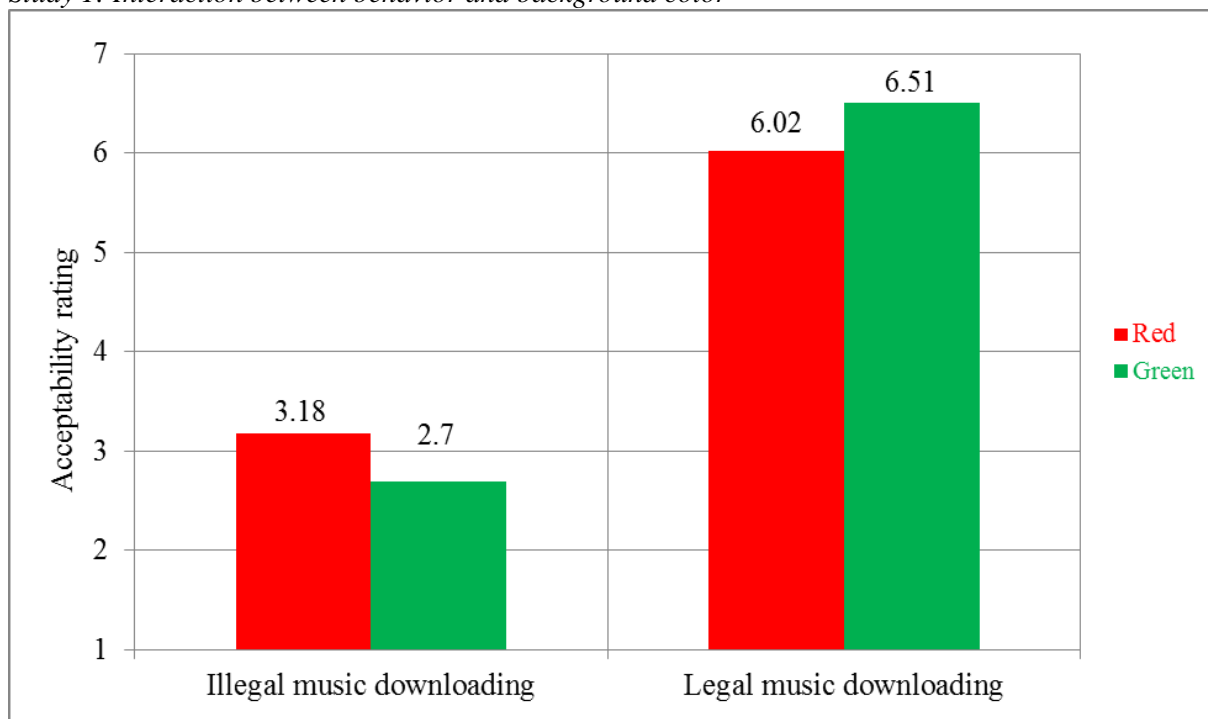
Two hundred twenty-one respondents (72 men, 149 women) between the ages of 18 and 67 years ( $M = 36.90$ ,  $SD = 13.54$ ) participated in an anonymous, self-administered online survey. They were randomly assigned to the conditions of a two (behavior: illegal versus legal music downloading) by two (background color: red versus green) between-subjects design. Participants confronted a message about either a negatively valenced behavior (i.e., illegal music downloading) or a positively valenced behavior (i.e., legal music downloading), describing either the negative consequences of illegal downloads or the positive consequences of legal ones (see *Appendix A* for the original Dutch messages as well as some screenshots and *Appendix B* for the English translation of these original messages). These messages appeared against a red (i.e., negatively valenced) or green (i.e., positively valenced) background. After reading the message, participants rated the acceptability of the behavior described on three seven-point semantic differential scales, anchored as “unacceptable–acceptable,”

“unethical–ethical,” and “wrong–right.” We averaged these ratings to form a judgment of moral acceptability ( $\alpha = .97$ ).

#### 4.2. Results and Discussion

We conducted an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with behavior and background color as the between-subjects independent variables and the moral acceptability judgment as the dependent variable. A significant main effect of behavior,  $F(1,217) = 366.74, p < .001$ , showed that overall, participants evaluated illegal music downloading as less positive ( $M = 2.94, SD = 1.80$ ) than legal music downloading ( $M = 6.27, SD = 1.86$ ). We found no main effect of background color,  $F(1,217) = .00, p = .96$ .

*Figure 1*  
*Study 1: Interaction between behavior and background color*



However, as we depict in *Figure 1* above, there was a significant interaction effect of behavior and background color,  $F(1,217) = 7.83, p < .01$ , such that respondents evaluated legal music downloading more positively when they saw a green background ( $M = 6.51, SD = .66$ ) rather than a

red background ( $M = 6.02$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ),  $F(1,217) = 3.92$ ,  $p < .05$ . Conversely, illegal music downloading prompted more negative evaluations when the background was green ( $M = 2.70$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ) compared with when it was red ( $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ),  $F(1,217) = 3.91$ ,  $p < .05$ .

These results are important for marketers or policy makers who hope to discourage consumers from behaving unethically or to encourage consumers to behave ethically. The findings indicate that discouraging unethical consumer behavior by means of persuasive messages can benefit from using a green background color instead of red in the background. Promoting desirable behavior also benefits from the use of a green (versus red) background. This relatively practical study has focused on one specific consumer behavior (i.e., music downloading). In Study 2, we pursue a conceptual replication of these findings while including various consumer behaviors.

## **5. Study 2**

### ***5.1. Participants and Procedure***

One hundred twenty-seven respondents (41 men, 86 women) between 18 and 68 years old ( $M = 33.05$ ,  $SD = 13.57$ ) were randomly assigned to the conditions of a two (behavior: undesirable versus desirable) by two (background color: red versus green) between-subjects design. Participants rated the acceptability of four desirable (see *Appendix C* for the original Dutch scenarios and *Appendix D* for the English translation of these original scenarios) or undesirable (see *Appendix E* for the original Dutch scenarios and *Appendix F* for the English translation of these original scenarios) consumer behaviors (in random order). The first scenario involved a consumer receiving too much change at a checkout. In the undesirable behavior condition, the consumer did not mention the error to the cashier and kept the extra change. In the desirable behavior condition, the consumer told the cashier and returned the extra change. In the second scenario, a consumer downloaded music from the Internet either legally or illegally. The third scenario concerned a consumer who, upon leaving a supermarket, noticed that he or she had not been charged for a particular item and either did or did not go back to

pay for it. Finally, the fourth scenario described a consumer who took a soft drink from the store shelf, drank it in the store, and did or did not pay for it at the checkout.

These four consumer behaviors were described on either a red or green background. The three semantic differential scales from Study 1 (“unacceptable-acceptable,” “unethical-ethical,” and “wrong-right”) were highly correlated (all Pearson correlation coefficients were above .91), so for Study 2, participants only had to make one judgment. They rated the acceptability of the four consumer behaviors on a Likert scale, ranging from “completely unacceptable” (1) to “completely acceptable” (7). After these moral judgments, participants rated the background color on which the (un)desirable behaviors were described on two seven-point semantic differential scales, with the anchor points “wrong” versus “right” and “negative” versus “positive.”

## **5.2. Results and Discussion**

As a manipulation check, we created a color valence index by averaging the wrong–right and negative–positive ratings ( $\alpha = .86$ ). The ANOVA used behavior (desirable versus undesirable) and background color (red versus green) as between-subjects independent variables and the color valence index as the dependent variable. As intended, only a significant main effect of background color emerged,  $F(1,123) = 44.89, p < .001$ . Specifically, red was rated as more negative/less positive ( $M = 3.52, SD = 1.75$ ) than green ( $M = 5.27, SD = 1.08$ ). Further, red was regarded as more negative ( $p = .028$ ), and green as more positive ( $p < .001$ ), than the neutral midpoint of 4.

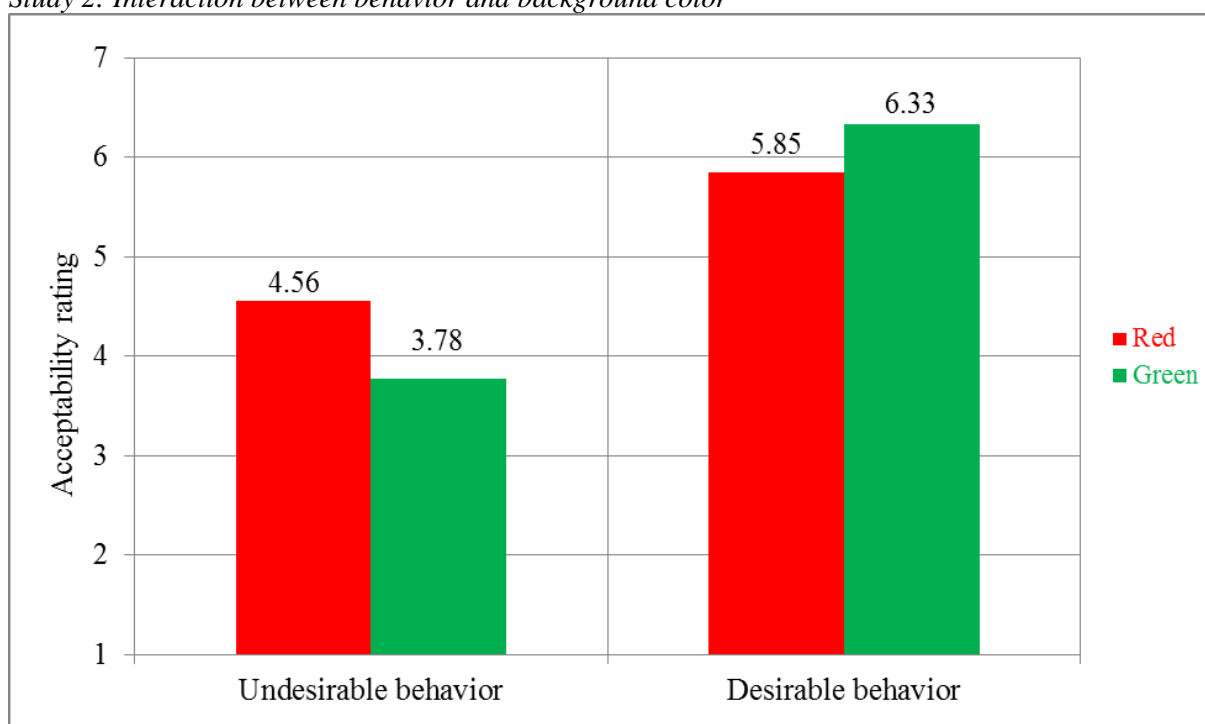
We averaged the acceptability ratings across the four scenarios ( $\alpha = .78$ ) and subjected them to a between-subjects ANOVA with behavior and background color as factors. As we are interested in the overall result across the various scenarios and want to rule out situation specific influences, we averaged responses across the scenarios instead of treating these scenarios as a within factor.

The significant main effect of behavior,  $F(1,123) = 134.75, p < .001$ , showed that undesirable consumer behaviors ( $M = 4.17, SD = 1.11$ ) were less accepted than the desirable ones ( $M = 6.09, SD = 0.81$ ). We also identified a significant interaction effect between behavior and background color,

$F(1,123) = 14.68, p < .001$  (see *Figure 2*). Desirable consumer behaviors were perceived as more acceptable when described on a green background ( $M = 6.33, SD = 0.53$ ) rather than a red background ( $M = 5.85, SD = 0.95$ ),  $F(1,58) = 5.68, p = .020$ . Conversely, undesirable consumer behaviors were perceived as less acceptable on a green background ( $M = 3.78, SD = 0.76$ ) than on a red background ( $M = 4.56, SD = 1.24$ ),  $F(1,65) = 9.47, p = .003$ . Finally, we found no significant main effect of background color,  $F(1,123) = .84, p = .36$ .

*Figure 2*

*Study 2: Interaction between behavior and background color*



In summary, the results of Study 2 show that a valence match between a behavior and a background color on which this behavior is described affects moral judgments of that behavior. More specifically, desirable behaviors are rated as more acceptable when described on a green background than on a red background, while undesirable behaviors are rated as more acceptable when described on a red background than on a green background. The latter finding contrasts with the lay belief demonstrated in our pilot study that negative colors such as red are better suited to prevent negative behavior.

## 6. Study 3

In Study 2, we did not manipulate the valence of the background colors and relied instead on the associations of red with negativity and green with positivity. The effects obtained in Study 2 could therefore be due to differences in specific associations with red and green rather than to their difference in valence. To rule out this alternative interpretation, Study 3 aims to replicate the effect of the color-behavior valence match on moral judgments by endowing initially neutral colors with either positive or negative valences through an evaluative conditioning procedure (i.e., a procedure that changes the liking of a stimulus through pairing that stimulus with positive or negative stimuli; for an overview, see De Houwer, 2011; Hofmann, De Houwer, Perugini, Baeyens, & Crombez, 2010).

Further, one may wonder whether the obtained effects are not due to experiencing processing fluency in case of behavior-color valence matches, but rather due to experiencing processing difficulty in case of behavior-color valence mismatches (i.e., disfluency). In particular, it could be that people consider describing behaviors on backgrounds with opposite valences as inappropriate or odd, as a result of which valence mismatches lead to less positive/more negative moral acceptability judgments (compared to the situation in which behaviors are described on backgrounds with similar or neutral valences). To investigate this possibility, Study 3 adds a control condition in which the (un)desirable behaviors are described on neutral colors (i.e., the colors that are endowed with either a positive or negative valence in the other conditions). This allows examining whether the obtained effects are due to valence matches and/or valence mismatches.

### 6.1. *Participants and Procedure*

Respondents ( $N = 216$ , 90 men, 126 women; aged 18–72 years,  $M = 26.85$ ,  $SD = 11.89$ ) were randomly assigned to the conditions of a two (behavior: undesirable versus desirable) by three (background color valence: negative versus positive versus neutral) between-subjects design. The survey consisted of two parts.

In a first part, participants considered 34 statements (see *Appendix G* for the original Dutch statements and *Appendix H* for the English translation of these original statements) and indicated, for each statement, whether they thought it was true or not. The statements were chosen to be obscure enough so that respondents would not know the correct answer but instead would have to guess, such as “1522 passengers died on the *Titanic*,” “Chlorine was discovered by Carl Scheele in 1774,” and “The Chinese Wall is 6259 kilometers in length.” Participants received feedback about their answers indicating whether they were wrong or right.

In the three different ‘background color valence’ conditions, the feedback (i.e., “wrong” and “right”) appeared in different colors. For the participants in the negative and positive background color valence conditions, the feedback appeared in light purple and beige. For half of them, “wrong” was written in light purple and “right” in beige; for the other half of these participants, this association was reversed. We chose light purple and beige on the basis of a pretest indicating both colors prompted neutral evaluations. The aim of this first part for those participants was to endow these two initially neutral colors with either negative or positive valences through their repeated association with ‘wrong’ and ‘right’. In the control condition (i.e., the ‘neutral background color valence’ condition), the negative feedback label (i.e., “wrong”) appeared in red, while the positive feedback label (i.e., “right”) appeared in green. Hence, in the control condition, the colors beige and light purple were not endowed with either negative or positive valences.

In the second part of the survey, participants rated the acceptability of either four undesirable or four desirable consumer behaviors (which were counterbalanced), identical to those in Study 2 (see again *Appendix C, D, E, and F*). These behaviors appeared on either beige or light purple backgrounds. Depending on the condition to which one was assigned in the first part of the survey, these backgrounds were associated with a positive, negative, or neutral valence. Participants rated the acceptability of the consumer behaviors on a Likert scale, ranging from “completely unacceptable” (1) to “completely acceptable” (7). After judging these behaviors, participants rated the background color of the scenarios (beige versus light purple) on two seven-point semantic differential scales, with the anchor points “wrong” versus “right” and “negative” versus “positive.”

## 6.2. Results and Discussion

We averaged the background color (i.e., either light purple or beige) ratings for the wrong–right and negative–positive scales to create a color valence index ( $\alpha = .75$ ). As a manipulation check, we conducted an ANOVA, with behavior and background color valence as between-subjects independent variables. We found only a significant main effect of background color valence,  $F(2,210) = 16.29$ ,  $p < .001$ . Colors were rated as more negative and wrong when associated with negative feedback ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) than with positive feedback ( $M = 4.35$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ;  $p < .001$ ) or in the neutral condition ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 0.34$ ;  $p = .001$ ). Further, colors were rated as more positive when associated with positive feedback than in the neutral condition ( $p = .035$ ). Finally, the colors associated with the negative feedback were regarded as more negative ( $p < .001$ ), the colors associated with the positive feedback as more positive ( $p = .014$ ), and the colors used in the neutral condition as not different ( $p = .859$ ) than the neutral midpoint of 4.

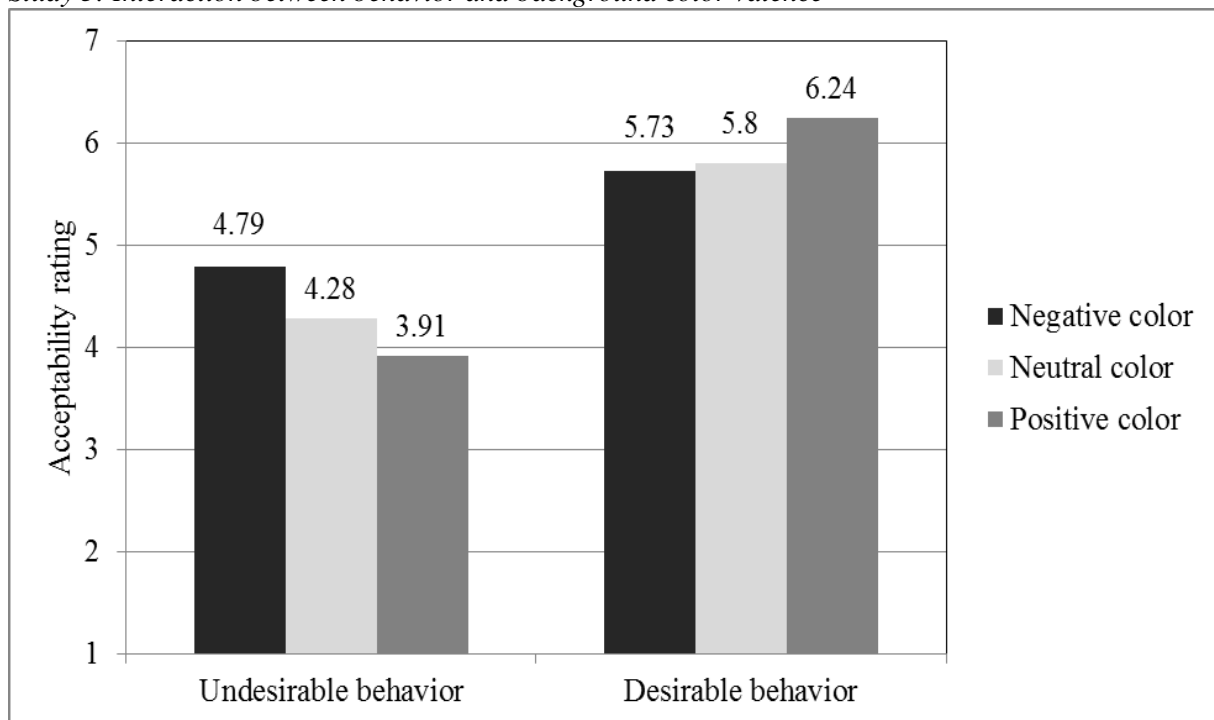
We averaged the acceptability ratings across the four scenarios ( $\alpha = .76$ ) and subjected this average to a between-subjects ANOVA with behavior and background color valence as the factors. As in Study 2, we are interested in the overall result across the various scenarios and want to rule out situation specific influences. Therefore, we averaged responses across the scenarios instead of treating these scenarios as a within factor.

While we obtained no main effect of background color valence,  $F(1,210) = 1.13$ ,  $p = .325$ , a significant main effect of behavior,  $F(1,210) = 157.16$ ,  $p < .001$ , showed that undesirable consumer behaviors were considered less acceptable ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) than desirable ones ( $M = 5.92$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ). As shown in *Figure 3*, we also found a significant interaction effect between behavior and background color valence,  $F(2,210) = 10.42$ ,  $p < .001$ . Background color valence significantly affected acceptability ratings of desirable consumer behaviors,  $F(2,110) = 3.25$ ,  $p = .043$ . They appeared more acceptable in the positive feedback ( $M = 6.24$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ) than in the negative ( $M = 5.73$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ;  $p = .021$ ) or neutral feedback condition ( $M = 5.80$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ;  $p = .043$ ). We obtained no significant difference between the negative and the neutral feedback condition ( $p = .74$ ).



Figure 3

Study 3: Interaction between behavior and background color valence



Acceptability ratings of undesirable consumer behaviors were also affected by background color valence,  $F(2,100) = 8.27$ ,  $p < .001$ . They were regarded as more acceptable in the negative feedback condition ( $M = 4.79$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) than in the positive ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ,  $p < .001$ ) or neutral feedback condition ( $M = 4.28$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ;  $p = .034$ ). The acceptability ratings of the undesirable consumer behaviors did not significantly differ between the positive and neutral feedback condition ( $p = .11$ ).

In summary, these results replicate those of Study 2. More specifically, undesirable behaviors appear more acceptable/less unacceptable when they are described with a negatively (versus positively) valenced background while desirable behaviors are perceived as more acceptable when they are described on a positively (versus negatively) valenced background. More generally, a match between the valence of an (un)desirable behavior and the valence of its color context results in more positive/less negative evaluations of the behavior.

In contrast to Study 2, we manipulated color valence rather than relied on colors with established and contrasting valence associations (i.e., red and green). This makes it more likely that the results we obtained can be attributed to color valence and not to any other specific color

associations. In addition, the results of Study 3 show that the valence match effects are not limited to the colors red and green but extend to other colors with a definite valence. Further, by adding neutral conditions (i.e., undesirable or desirable behaviors described on neutral backgrounds), this third study showed that the findings are due to experiencing processing fluency in case of behavior-color valence matches, rather than to experiencing processing difficulty in case of behavior-color valence mismatches (i.e., disfluency).

## **7. General Discussion**

In many situations, written communication aims to deter people from engaging in some unwanted behavior or to incite them to display some wanted behavior. In addition to the content of the message, diverse elements of the presentation may determine the effectiveness of such written persuasion attempts. This chapter focuses on color cues associated with the message. Various lines of research have documented so-called match or fit effects, but we find that a match between color cue valence and message valence is not always beneficial. Colors with a positive valence may help instigate wanted behavior, but colors with a negative valence might not reduce unwanted behavior. Ironically, they may even increase the prevalence of negative behaviors.

Findings of Study 1 showed that people evaluate illegal music downloading less negatively after they have read a message designed to persuade people of its unacceptability that uses a red (versus green) background color. Legal music downloading instead earns more positive evaluations when the message to persuade people of this behavior's acceptability uses a green (versus red) background color. In Study 2, we conceptually replicated these findings by describing various consumer behaviors instead of just legal versus illegal music downloading. The findings demonstrated that people rate undesirable behavior more acceptable when its description appears on a red instead of a green background. Desirable behavior instead gets rated as more acceptable when the description uses a green background rather than a red one. In Study 3, we replicated these findings by describing various (un)desirable consumer behaviors on a background of which the color valence had been manipulated through an evaluative conditioning procedure. In line with the results of Study 2,

undesirable behaviors are rated as more acceptable on a negative (versus positive or neutral) background while desirable behaviors are rated more acceptable when described on a positive (versus negative or neutral) background. This suggests that the obtained effects are due to processing fluency in case of valence matches and not to disfluency in case of valence mismatches.

From a practical point of view, these findings are useful for decision makers (e.g., marketers, policy makers) who work to improve moral judgments and behaviors. Both prevention and promotion campaigns should avoid colors that exhibit a negative valence; specifically, the use of the color red appears ill conceived for promotion and prevention campaigns. This finding is notable; it not only flies in the face of common intuition that predicts increased persuasion when the color cue valence matches the behavior valence (see our pilot study), but it also defies that the color red is beneficial because it may serve to draw people's attention. Even if decision makers prefer to use the color red as it draws people's attention, they should be aware of the fact that using this color might render undesirable behaviors less negative and desirable behaviors less positive.

Our study also contributes to extant literature in several respects. First, our results indicate that moral decision making is not limited to conscious, rational, deliberative thinking processes, as long has been suggested (e.g., Kohlberg, 1976; Piaget, 1965; Rest, 1986). By demonstrating the effect of irrelevant color cues on moral judgment, our findings support an emerging stream of research that calls for more investigation of the importance of intuitive elements and their influence on moral judgments (e.g., Haidt, 2001).

Second, in many situations, the use of the color red has positive consequences. Research indicates that red prompts the highest levels of perceived hazard and behavioral compliance with warnings (e.g., Braun & Silver, 1995; Chan & Ng, 2009). Other studies show that red enhances cognitive task performance (e.g., Kwallek & Lewis, 1990; Stone, 2003). Nevertheless, our findings warn that the use of the color red may backfire and result in negative consequences. It should be noted, however, that the valence associations with red and green may be culture specific (e.g., in China, red stands for luck). So, our interpretation only holds for cultures that view red as negative and green as positive.

Third, literature is replete with examples of positive effects derived from a match among message elements. Thus beautiful endorsers are more effective in endorsing beauty products than less beautiful endorsers (e.g., Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1990), and affective messages are better suited to change affective attitudes, whereas cognitive messages are more effective for changing cognitive attitudes (Mayer & Tormala, 2010). People also tend to be more persuaded by messages that match, rather than mismatch, their chronic self-regulatory orientation (e.g., Adams, Fasseur, & Geuens, 2011; Zhao & Pechmann, 2007). In contrast, and for the first time to the best of our knowledge, we find that a match may backfire in persuasive contexts. On one level, the match between color valence and message valence may be beneficial if it results in enhanced processing fluency. For prevention campaigns, however, such processing fluency may backfire when the ensuing positive affect gets attributed to the behavior, rather than the processing, and makes the negative behavior seem less unacceptable.

Fourth, our study extends research on fluency in several respects. Although perceptual and conceptual fluency are independent, distinct constructs, with their own antecedents and consequences (e.g., Cabeza & Ohta, 1993; Lee, 2002; Tulving & Schacter, 1990), most studies of processing fluency focus on perceptual fluency (i.e., ease with which people perceive and identify the physical characteristics of stimuli) while the number of studies on conceptual fluency is rather limited (Lee & Labroo, 2004). Further, our research adds to the limited literature on conceptual fluency because we focus on a different aspect of this type of fluency. In fact, studies on conceptual fluency mainly use semantic priming which is very specific. Our studies show that affective priming may also yield results that are compatible with conceptual fluency, which is much more general because it merely requires overlap in valence rather than in content.

Our research also extends prior literature on fluency because it shows that it not only affects preferences and liking judgments, which may be rather malleable (Simonson, 2008), but also more profound moral acceptability judgments. This answers to the call for research on the effects of fluency on alternative evaluative judgments (Winkielman et al., 2003). In fact, no other studies exist demonstrating the impact of conceptual fluency in the moral domain. In addition, while the theory on processing fluency assumes that fluency could render any stimulus more positive, most fluency studies

show effects for *neutral* or *new* stimuli, mostly perceptual ones. This paper, on the other hand, uses complex, linguistic stimuli with very clear valence connotations. Our results show that fluency effects may be more general and robust than shown in previous research, as fluency may indeed not only render neutral stimuli positive or negative, but also render positive and negative stimuli more positive/less negative.

Our findings are not only interesting in their own right but also support a reinterpretation of previous research findings, such as the notion that participants in a room with slightly dimmed lighting cheat more and earn more undeserved money than those in a well-lit room (Zhong, Bohns & Gino, 2010). The authors explain these findings by means of anonymity, but they might also be evidence of altered moral judgments due to fluency effects. Darkness is often related to badness (Meier et al., 2004), so a darker room could make it easier to think of behaviors related to cheating and dishonesty. Such fluency could prompt a sense of greater moral acceptability of these behaviors and thus increase the likelihood of displaying such behavior. Further research is needed to test this reinterpretation, but our findings imply that negative behavior might be tolerated more in the presence of negative cues.

### ***7.1. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research***

Ultimately, these findings raise several questions for further research. First, it is important to investigate to what extent our findings generalize to, among others, other cues and situations. For instance, it remains unclear if other negatively valenced cues (e.g., symbols, pictures) lead to similar valence match effects. In addition, we do not know if color cues also affect consumption experiences. For example, if a patient expects a cough syrup to taste bad, might this syrup taste better if the package uses red colors or depicts negative elements or symbols? Interesting in this particular context is the fact that a syrup that is expected to taste bad might actually indicate its high therapeutical quality. Or, what if people repeatedly are confronted with this syrup? It might be that the influence of intuitive feelings gets overridden by experience. It might thus be interesting to investigate to which extent the ‘intuitive use’ of colors triggers lasting effects on moral judgments. Furthermore, it would be valuable for further studies to examine to which extent our results extrapolate to other senses. At the same time,

future research should take a closer look at possible boundary conditions (next to the ‘experience’ factor already mentioned above). For instance, drawing on previous research (Tsai & McGill, 2011), we might expect that the conceptual fluency effect is limited to people processing the information at lower (versus higher) construal levels. Further, in our studies participants merely saw descriptions of behaviors and had to judge their moral acceptability. Future research might investigate the actual effects on behavior or intentions rather than on moral acceptability ratings.

Second, drawing on affective priming, we argue that negative messages are easier to process in the presence of negative cues. However, in affective priming paradigms, the stimuli are very simple and automatically activate the associated valence. Our results suggest that affective priming effects are obtained for more complex stimuli too, which raises the question of how valence of complex stimuli is determined. A message designed to deter people from engaging in unwanted behavior by definition involves a negatively valenced behavior, but the message itself, by advocating an avoidance of something negative, seems positive. Still, prevention campaigns usually try to persuade people from avoiding something that they enjoy, such that they imply some restriction on individual freedom and thus could create a negative connotation. Additional research should investigate whether message valence is determined by message content or by message purpose.

Third, we attribute the effects we obtain to conceptual fluency, but offer no direct evidence to support this. Further research should test this underlying process, such as by using moderation mechanisms. For example, if processing speed is the primary reason, then manipulating cognitive load should mitigate this effect. Other methods that could provide evidence of the underlying process are self-reported measures of ease of processing or response time during judgment. Alternatively, a separate test might measure response times to related words presented against a certain background color that matches or mismatches the valence of these words. Such extra studies should also control for level of arousal to rule out that the obtained results are due to the different level of arousal colors might evoke rather than to their difference in valence.

Finally, future studies should examine the viability of alternative explanations. Several alternative explanations may come to mind. First, one could argue that valence incongruency would result in less thorough processing, thereby resulting in less polarized judgments. This explanation, however, only holds for the results obtained for the desirable behavior. An explanation that proposes that the colors red and green may bring to mind a set of respectively negative and positive behaviors that serve as reference points for the judgmental behavioral stimuli and polarize evaluations in the mismatch conditions is inconsistent with the results obtained for desirable behaviors. A more challenging alternative explanation proposes that valence (in)congruency affects mood rather than processing fluency. In line with mood-as-information theory (Clore, Schwarz, & Conway, 1994; Schwarz & Clore, 1983), any mood effect may bias subsequent evaluative judgments, like the moral acceptability judgments in our studies. In other words, an (un)desirable behavior described on a background with a similar (opposite) valence might result in a positive (negative) mood which, in turn, results in a more positive/less negative (less positive/more negative) evaluation of the (un)desirable behavior. Although more research is needed to tease out the exact mechanism, for now, our studies show that the use of negative color cues in campaigns aimed to prevent unwanted behavior may be ill advised.

## **Note**

<sup>1</sup> The terms bad, negative, unwanted, undesirable, and immoral are used interchangeably in this chapter, and so are the terms good, positive, wanted, desirable, and moral.



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## 9. Appendices

### 9.1. Appendix A: Messages about Illegal and Legal Music Downloading (Study 1) – Dutch

**Muziek downloaden en er niet voor betalen (illegaal downloaden dus) zorgt er voor dat:**

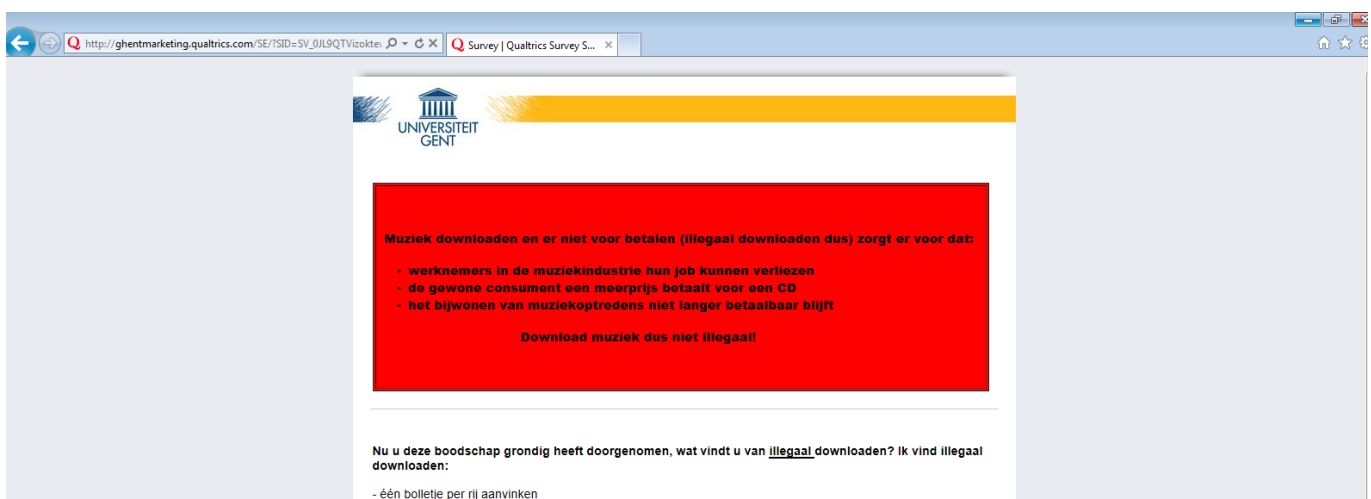
- werknemers in de muziekindustrie hun job kunnen verliezen
- de gewone consument een meerprijs betaalt voor een CD
- het bijwonen van muziekoptredens niet langer betaalbaar blijft

**Download muziek dus niet illegaal!**


**Muziek downloaden en ervoor betalen (legaal downloaden dus) zorgt er voor dat:**

- werknemers in de muziekindustrie hun job kunnen behouden
- de gewone consument geen meerprijs betaalt voor een CD
- het bijwonen van muziekoptredens betaalbaar blijft

**Download muziek dus legaal!**



http://ghentmarketing.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV\_0IL9QTVizokten Survey | Qualtrics Survey S...

 UNIVERSITEIT GENT

**Muziek downloaden en er niet voor betalen (illegaal downloaden dus) zorgt er voor dat:**

- werknemers in de muziekindustrie hun job kunnen verliezen
- de gewone consument een meerprijs betaalt voor een CD
- het bijwonen van muzikoptredens niet langer betaalbaar blijft

**Download muziek dus niet illegaal!**

Nu u deze boodschap grondig heeft doorgenomen, wat vindt u van illegaal downloaden? Ik vind illegaal downloaden:

- één bolletje per rij aanvinken

**9.2. Appendix B: Messages about Illegal and Legal Music Downloading (Study 1) – English**

**Downloading music and not paying for it (illegal downloading) makes it such that:**

- **employees in the music industry might lose their jobs**
- **the ordinary consumer pays more for a CD**
- **attendance at music performances is no longer affordable**

**So do not download music illegally!**

**Downloading music and paying for it (legal downloading) makes it such that:**

- **employees in the music industry can keep their jobs**
- **the ordinary consumer does not have to pay more for a CD**
- **attendance at music performances remains affordable**

**So download music legally!**



### ***9.3. Appendix C: Desirable Consumer Behaviors (Study 2 – Study 3) – Dutch***

**Een consument krijgt teveel wisselgeld terug aan de kassa. De consument zegt dit tegen de kassierster en geeft het extra wisselgeld terug.**

**Een consument downloadt legaal muziek van het internet en koopt deze muziek dus aan.**

**Een consument keert terug naar de supermarkt om te betalen voor een product dat de kassierster was vergeten aanrekenen.**

**Een consument neemt een blikje frisdrank uit het winkelrek en drinkt het uit. Aan de kassa betaalt de consument voor het blikje.**

**9.4. Appendix D: Desirable Consumer Behaviors (Study 2 – Study 3) – English**

**A consumer receives too much change at the checkout. The consumer mentions this to the cashier and gives the extra money back.**

**A consumer legally downloads music from the Internet and thus pays for this music.**

**A consumer returns to the supermarket to pay for an item the cashier mistakenly did not charge the consumer for.**

**A consumer takes a soft drink from the store shelf and drinks it. The consumer pays for the soft drink at the checkout.**

**9.5. Appendix E: Undesirable Consumer Behaviors (Study 2 – Study 3) – Dutch**

**Een consument krijgt teveel wisselgeld terug aan de kassa, maar zegt dit niet tegen de kassierster en houdt het extra wisselgeld.**

**Een consument downloadt illegaal muziek van het internet in plaats van deze aan te kopen.**

**Een consument keert niet terug naar de supermarkt om te betalen voor een product dat de kassierster was vergeten aanrekenen.**

**Een consument neemt een blikje frisdrank uit het winkelrek en drinkt het uit zonder ervoor te betalen.**

**9.6. Appendix F: Undesirable Consumer Behaviors (Study 2 – Study 3) – English**

**A consumer receives too much change at the checkout, but does not mention this to the cashier  
and keeps the extra money.**

**A consumer illegally downloads music from the Internet instead of paying for this music.**

**A consumer does not return to the supermarket to pay for an item the cashier mistakenly did  
not charge the consumer for.**

**A consumer takes a soft drink from the store shelf and drinks it without paying for it.**

### **9.7. Appendix G: Statements (Study 3) – Dutch**

1. De Eiffeltoren in Parijs is 317 meter hoog tot aan de top van de vlaggenstok
2. De Belg consumeert gemiddeld 9,69 kilogram chocolade per jaar
3. De piramide van Cheops in Egypte is 230,4 meter breed
4. De sociale netwerksite Facebook heeft in 2009 een omzet van 800 miljoen dollar geboekt
5. Een volwassen menselijk lichaam bevat 5 tot 6 liter bloed
6. De slechtvalk is het snelste dier ter wereld
7. De Nijl is de langste rivier ter wereld
8. De hoogste snelheid ooit gehaald op een fiets is 268,831 km/uur
9. De tulp komt oorspronkelijk uit Turkije
10. Vrijdag de 17<sup>de</sup> is een ongeluksdag in Italië
11. De grootste diamant is zo groot als de halve maan
12. Olifanten zijn de enige zoogdieren die niet kunnen springen
13. Een volgroeide beer kan even snel rennen als een paard
14. Een mug heeft tanden
15. Gent heeft een oppervlakte van 156,18 vierkante kilometer
16. Bart De Wever werd geboren op 21 december 1970
17. 1522 opvarenden van de Titanic kwamen om het leven
18. Angelina Jolie won intussen 3 Golden Globes
19. 74000 Belgen spreken Duits als moedertaal
20. De Tsjechen consumeren gemiddeld genomen het meeste aantal liters bier in de wereld
21. Chloor werd in 1774 ontdekt door Carl Scheele
22. De Wolga is de langste rivier in Europa
23. 11% van de totale wereldbevolking woont in Europa
24. De Chinese Muur is 6259 kilometer lang
25. De eerste grote rol van acteur Leonardo DiCaprio was in de televisieserie 'Parenthood'
26. De meest voorkomende naam ter wereld is Mohammed

27. De film 'Jurassic Park' is gebaseerd op het gelijknamige boek van Michael Chrichton
28. Er werden reeds 273 afleveringen opgenomen van de reeks FC De Kampioenen
29. Studio Brussel zond voor de eerste keer uit op 1 april 1983
30. Svetlana Medvedeva is de vrouw van de Russische president
31. De Belgische voetbalclub RSC Anderlecht werd opgericht op 29 mei 1908
32. Potvissen kunnen tot 3000 meter diepte duiken
33. Kamelen hebben drie oogleden om hun ogen te beschermen tegen het opvliegende zand
34. 'Marie' is momenteel de populairste voornaam voor pasgeboren meisjes in Vlaanderen

### **9.8. Appendix H: Statements (Study 3) – English**

1. The Eiffel Tower in Paris is 317 metres high up to the flagpole
2. A Belgian consumes 9.69 kilograms of chocolate on average per year
3. The Cheops Pyramid in Egypt is 230.4 metres wide
4. The social network site Facebook had a turnover of 800 million dollars in 2009
5. An adult human body contains 5 to 6 litres of blood
6. The peregrine is the fastest animal in the world
7. The Nile is the longest river in the world
8. The biggest speed one ever reached on a bike is 268.831 kilometres per hour
9. The Tulip originates from Turkey
10. Friday the 17<sup>th</sup> is considered to be an unlucky day in Italy
11. The biggest diamond is as big as half the moon
12. Elephants are the only mammals who cannot jump
13. A full-grown bear can run as fast as a horse
14. A mosquito has teeth
15. Ghent has a surface of 156.18 square kilometre
16. Bart De Wever was born on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 1970
17. 1522 passengers died on the Titanic
18. Angelina Jolie won already 3 Golden Globes
19. 74000 Belgians are native speakers of German
20. Czech consume the highest amount of litres beer on average in the world
21. Chlorine was discovered by Carl Scheele in 1774
22. The Wolga is the longest river in Europe
23. 11 percent of the total world population lives in Europe
24. The Chinese Wall is 6259 kilometres in length
25. The first big role of actor Leonardo DiCaprio was in the television serial 'Parenthood'
26. The most widespread name in the world is Mohammed

27. The movie 'Jurassic Park' is based on the novel of the same name written by Michael Chrichton
28. Already 273 episodes of the television serial FC De Kampioenen are recorded
29. Studio Brussel broadcasted first on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 1983
30. Svetlana Medvedeva is the wife of the Russian president
31. The Belgian football club RSC Anderlecht was founded on the 29<sup>th</sup> of May 1908
32. Sperm whales are able to dive at a depth of 3000 metres
33. Camels have three eyelids to protect their eyes against up flying sand
34. 'Marie' is, on this moment, the most popular first name for newborn baby girls in Flanders







## **Chapter 4:**

### **Double Standards: The Role of Techniques of Neutralization**

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This chapter is based on De Bock, T., & Van Kenhove, P. (2011). Double standards: The role of techniques of neutralization. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 99(2), 283-296.



## **Chapter 4:**

### **Double Standards: The Role of Techniques of Neutralization**

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#### **1. Abstract**

Previous research shows that consumers use double standards. That is, consumers evaluate unethical business actions as more unacceptable compared to similar consumer actions. Double standards are often quoted as a major stream in ethical literature, though research dealing with this topic remains scarce. Among others, little is known about the process(es) underlying these double standards. The purpose of the study reported in this chapter is to investigate whether the ‘techniques of neutralization’ could provide a meaningful way of approaching the double standard phenomenon. Findings indicate that the higher the extent to which people agree with arguments explaining away the misbehavior enacted by consumers or businesses (i.e., a higher extent of neutralization), the more they tolerate these behaviors. Further, findings show that the same respondents who justify questionable consumer actions to a certain degree, condone the same misbehaviors enacted by businesses to a much lesser extent. In this way, the techniques of neutralization concern a valuable approach to explain the double standard phenomenon.

**Keywords:** consumer ethics, business ethics, corporate ethics, double standards, ethical beliefs, moral hypocrisy, neutralization techniques

## **2. Introduction**

A growing number of studies deals with perceptions of unethical consumer and corporate<sup>1</sup> practices (e.g., Alexander, 2002; Chiou & Pan, 2008; Ingram, Skinner, & Taylor, 2005; Vitell, Singh, & Paolillo, 2007). Nevertheless, research examining the apparent double standard existing between what consumers perceive as acceptable consumer behavior and what they believe is acceptable corporate behavior, remains scarce. Contradictory, double standards are often quoted as a major stream in ethical literature (e.g., Rallapalli, Vitell, Wiebe, & Barnes, 1994; Rawwas, Vitell, & Al-Khatib, 1994; Vitell, Lumpkin & Rawwas, 1991; Vitell & Muncy, 1992). Previous studies indicate that consumers evaluate unethical business actions as more unacceptable compared to similar consumer actions (e.g., DePaulo, 1985, 1987; Vermeir & Van Kenhove, 2008). One of the remaining questions concerns possible explanations for the use of these double standards. Only after having an idea about the explanatory factors associated with the use of double standards, one can become concerned with influencing or changing this phenomenon. The purpose of the present study is to gain a better understanding of double standards. More specifically, we examine whether the techniques of neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 1957) could provide a meaningful way of approaching this phenomenon.

## **3. Theoretical Background and Hypothesis**

### ***3.1. Double Standards***

Business literature suggests that individuals judge the misbehavior of businesses (or their representatives) more harshly than similar behavior of individual consumers. A study by Wilkes (1978), for example, reflects this idea of consumers tending to hold business to a higher standard than they themselves are willing to follow. More specifically, he investigates consumers' judgments concerning how wrong certain consumer activities are. Even when consumers disapprove of engaging in certain questionable activities, they still tolerate some of these. Consumers generally justify these

‘points of tolerance’ using arguments that business rather than the consumer is at fault. Drucker (1981) maintains that a double standard is implicit in the treatment of ‘business ethics’ and ‘business social responsibility’ as topics separate from ethics in general. Specifically, he argues that ‘business ethics’ means holding business to a different (i.e., higher) standard of conduct than ‘ordinary people’.

In order to demonstrate a double standard empirically, DePaulo (1985) conducts a telephone survey in which respondents have to indicate whether they feel that similar misconduct of a salesperson and a consumer is wrong. Results show that 8 percent openly admits to a double standard by maintaining that deception is wrong for the salesperson but not for the customer. DePaulo (1987) argues that this 8 percent figure probably underestimates the prevalence of double standards, because respondents holding double standards may realize their inconsistency and find it embarrassing, or because the study does not investigate the degree of perceived wrongness. In trying to avoid these problems, a follow-up study (DePaulo, 1987) uses a between-groups design involving two versions of an anonymous questionnaire where subjects have to evaluate an automobile salesperson or a customer using similar deceptive bargaining tactics. Results indicate that consumers are more critical of sellers who engage in unethical behavior than they are of buyers who engage in the same practices.

Vermeir and Van Kenhove (2008) recently confirm the previous work of DePaulo (1985, 1987) by showing that consumers have a double standard when it comes to their own unethical behavior compared to that of businesses. More specifically, respondents evaluate unethical corporate actions as more unacceptable compared to similar consumer actions. Further, their study explores the role of gender in double standards and shows that women use less double standards compared to men.

### ***3.2. Techniques of Neutralization***

The ‘techniques of neutralization’ originate from social disorganization and deviance literature, and more specifically the work of Sykes and Matza (1957). These techniques of neutralization are rationalizations one might use to justify non-normative behavior. Consumers can explain away negative consumer or corporate behavior by invoking five distinct techniques

representing various motives that can insulate these misbehaving consumers or corporations from any blame (cf. Strutton, Vitell, & Pelton, 1994).

The first technique, 'denial of responsibility', is a circumstance in which individuals argue that consumers or corporations are not accountable for their norm-violating actions because factors beyond their control are operating. A typical example might be: 'It's not the consumer's/corporation's fault, the consumer/corporation had no other choice'. Concerning the second technique, 'denial of injury', individuals contend that the consumer or corporate misbehavior is not really serious because no party suffers directly as a result of it. One might argue: 'What's the big deal? No one was hurt'. Using a 'denial of victim' rationalization means that individuals counter any blame for consumer or business misactions by arguing that the violated party deserves whatever injury they received. One might comment: 'If they're foolish enough to believe that, it's their own fault they were taken advantage of'. 'Condemning the condemners' refers to individuals deflecting moral condemnation to those ridiculing consumers or corporations by pointing out that they engage in similar misbehavior. A typical response might be: 'The consumer/company was only doing what other consumers/companies do all the time'. Concerning the last technique of neutralization, 'appeal to higher loyalties', individuals argue that the questionable consumer or corporate behavior is the by-product of the consumer's/corporation's attempt to actualize a higher order ideal or value (whether this ideal or value refers to one's own or others' 'benefit'). A comment may be: 'To some what the consumer/business did may appear wrong, but the consumer/business did it for his or her family/employees'.

When individuals need to evaluate unethical consumer or corporate practices, they might use these various neutralization techniques. In other words, they could render behavioral norms inoperative, thereby freeing the respective consumers or businesses from engaging in behavior which one would otherwise consider as deviant. If one lowers or removes the societal norms prohibiting unethical behavior in a given setting by means of these techniques, any feeling that consumers or businesses are doing wrong will be dampened. Consequently, the greater the extent to which people neutralize when judging questionable consumer or corporate practices (as a means of reducing culpability stemming from this norm violation enacted by consumers or businesses), the more tolerant the evaluation of these consumer and corporate misactions will be. In other words, we expect that the



extent to which consumers neutralize relates positively to their evaluation of unethical practices enacted by a consumer or a corporation (representative). That is, the more people neutralize, the more they tolerate questionable (consumer or corporate) practices.

People are capable of engaging in unethical acts. At the same time, using neutralization techniques enables them to get rid of any feeling of responsibility or blame for these acts. Previous research shows that this ‘moral leniency’ extends beyond the self when evaluating moral transgressions conducted by in-group members compared to out-group members (Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007). Based on and extending this previous finding, we hypothesize that consumers’ own ‘moral mildness’ extrapolates to some extent toward other consumers’ (cf. in-group) moral transgressions, but not to the same extent toward corporations’ (cf. out-group) transgressions. In other words, we expect that consumers engage in more consciously motivated reasoning when judging transgressions of other consumers, while these motivated reasoning processes do not, or to a lesser extent, come into play when judging businesses’ violations. So briefly stated, we expect that consumers will be less likely to neutralize when evaluating unethical corporate acts compared to unethical consumer acts.

The above reasoning is actually supported by what previous research (DePaulo, 1987; Vermeir & Van Kenhove, 2008) implied but never investigated: The same respondents who justify their own questionable actions and those of other consumers to a certain extent presumably condone the same mistreatment instigated by businesses to a much lesser degree. Taking into account the previously noted idea of a positive relationship between neutralization and moral judgments, this difference in the extent of neutralization is expected to result in a difference in consumers’ evaluations of similar unethical consumer and corporate practices (i.e., the double standard phenomenon). Consequently, we believe the techniques of neutralization to be a process giving an explanation of why consumers judge similar unethical behaviors as more unacceptable when a corporation rather than a consumer engages in them. In other words, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis: Consumers neutralize to a higher extent when judging unethical consumer practices than when judging similar unethical corporate practices.

#### 4. Methodology: Sample and Measures

The total sample consists of 278 university students, aged between 18 and 27 ( $M = 20.77$ ,  $SD = 1.84$ ), of which 160 (57.6%) are female and 118 (42.4%) are male. Participants completing the anonymous self-administered online questionnaire have to read five scenarios, of which we randomize the order of appearance, depicting questionable practices. Five dimensions of the Consumer Ethics Scale (i.e., ‘actively benefiting from illegal activities’, ‘passively benefiting at the expense of others’, ‘actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices’, ‘no harm/no foul’, and ‘downloading copyrighted materials/buying counterfeit goods’; Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992, 2005; see *Chapter 1: Introduction*) form the basis for these scenarios.

We create two versions of our questionnaire: one version asks respondents to make judgments of unethical actions enacted by a corporation, the other version asks respondents’ opinion about exactly the same actions but enacted by a consumer (see *Appendix A* for the original Dutch scenarios and *Appendix B* for the English translation of these scenarios). About half of the respondents complete the ‘consumer version’ [ $N = 145$  or 52.2%; 83 females (57.2%) and 62 males (42.8%)], the other half completes the ‘corporation version’ [ $N = 133$  or 47.8%; 77 females (57.9%) and 56 males (42.1%)]. We use this *between*-groups design to avoid the problem of respondents being unwilling to admit their inconsistency when using double standards (DePaulo, 1987).

After each scenario, respondents have to read five statements reflecting specific techniques of neutralization offering potential justification for the consumer’s or corporation’s misbehavior as depicted in the scenario. Each item addresses the domain of one of the five neutralization techniques as one might use in that particular situation (i.e., denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of victim, condemning the condemners, appeal to higher loyalties). The two versions of the questionnaire state identical techniques of neutralization after similar scenarios (see *Appendix A* for the original Dutch items and *Appendix B* for the English translation of these items). As they read each statement, respondents provide their level of (dis)agreement on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from (1) ‘totally disagree’ to (7) ‘totally agree’ that the circumstances described within a given item explain away the consumer’s or corporation’s misaction (Strutton, Pelton, & Ferrell, 1997; Strutton et al.,

1994). For example, in case of the scenario in which a consumer or business company downloads (copyrighted) software without paying for it, the ‘condemning the condemners’ item states the following: ‘The company/consumer should not be blamed for this action because other companies/consumers also do this’.

The reliabilities of the five neutralization items for each of the five scenarios depicting questionable actions, split up for the two versions (i.e., consumer version and corporation version) of our questionnaire, are as follows: ‘actively benefiting from illegal activities’ (consumer version:  $\alpha = .80$ ; corporation version:  $\alpha = .83$ ), ‘passively benefiting at the expense of others’ (consumer version:  $\alpha = .76$ ; corporation version:  $\alpha = .76$ ), ‘actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices’ (consumer version:  $\alpha = .76$ ; corporation version:  $\alpha = .81$ ), ‘no harm/no foul’ (consumer version:  $\alpha = .64$ ; corporation version:  $\alpha = .69$ ), and ‘downloading copyrighted materials/ buying counterfeit goods’ (consumer version:  $\alpha = .76$ ; corporation version:  $\alpha = .71$ ). So for instance, the reliability score for the five different neutralization items after the ‘actively benefiting from illegal activities *consumer*’ scenario is .80. The authors sum the five different rationalization items after each (consumer or corporation) scenario to come up with one single numeric value representing the extent of neutralization for each of the five scenarios depicting questionable consumer or corporate practices.

After clarifying their (dis)agreement with the different rationalization items, participants have to indicate how acceptable they believe the depicted practice to be on a seven-point Likert scale with higher scores indicating a more tolerant judgment. We repeat this procedure for all five scenarios that each respondent has to read.

## 5. Results

The results of a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) with ‘version’ (consumer versus corporation) as between-subjects independent variable and the evaluations of the five questionable practices as dependent variables reveal a significant main effect of ‘version’, *Wilks’ Lambda* = .63,  $F(5,272) = 31.59$ ,  $p < .001$ . More specifically, findings show that consumers are more intolerant toward questionable corporate practices compared to questionable consumer practices.

Respondents perceive the business misactions more negatively compared to similar questionable consumer practices, denoting a double standard for four out of five scenarios (see *Table 1*): ‘passively benefiting at the expense of others’ (passive), ‘actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices’ (active/ legal), ‘no harm/no foul’ (no harm), and ‘downloading copyrighted materials/buying counterfeit goods’ (downloading). Respondents’ perceptions of the ‘actively benefiting from illegal activities’ scenario (active/illegal) are not significantly different between the two versions.

*Table 1*  
*Mean values and standard deviations of evaluations of five consumer or corporation scenarios*

	Double standard test				
	Consumer ( <i>N</i> = 145)		Corporation ( <i>N</i> = 133)		<i>p</i> -value
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Active/illegal	3.08	1.22	3.10	1.22	.92
Passive	4.02	1.53	2.22	1.07	.00
Active/legal	3.61	1.24	2.77	1.23	.00
No harm	4.55	1.26	4.20	1.20	.02
Downloading	3.99	1.37	3.35	1.16	.00

**Legend**

*Active/illegal:* *Actively benefiting from illegal activities*  
“A consumer/company returns a product to the supplier because it’s damaged. However, the damage was the fault of the consumer/company and not of the supplier.”

*Passive:* *Passively benefiting at the expense of others*  
“A company needs to repay 40 euros on the bank account of a consumer/company. However, by inattention, the company pays 60 euros. The consumer/company notices this, but doesn’t say anything and keeps the extra 20 euros.”

*Active/legal:* *Actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices*  
“A consumer/company doesn’t tell the whole truth when negotiating with a car dealer about the price of a new vehicle.”

*No harm:* *No harm/no foul*  
“During some weeks, a consumer/company negotiates with an architect’s firm about the plans for a new accommodation, although the consumer/company is not yet completely sure about the cooperation with the firm and, maybe, will shrug off the building plan.”

*Downloading:* *Downloading copyrighted materials/buying counterfeit goods*  
“A consumer/company downloaded (copyrighted) software on one of his/her/its computers without paying for it.”

As previous research indicates gender differences in double standards (Vermeir & Van Kenhove, 2008), we want to check the role of gender by adding this variable as a between-subjects factor and running a new MANOVA. Neither the main effect of gender, *Wilks' Lambda* = .97,  $F(5,270) = 1.53$ ,  $p > .05$ , nor the interaction of version with gender, *Wilks' Lambda* = .98,  $F(5,270) = .96$ ,  $p > .05$ , is significant.

To test the idea formulated in the theoretical background section that the extent to which consumers neutralize in case of specific consumer or corporate questionable practices relates positively to their judgments of these practices, we conduct five separate regression analyses<sup>2</sup> for each version of the questionnaire with the extent of neutralization as independent variable and the evaluation of each of these five (consumer or corporate) scenarios as dependent variable. *Tables 2a-2e* give an overview of the results of these analyses. Each table represent one dimension of the Consumer Ethics Scale (i.e., 'actively benefiting from illegal activities' (active/illegal), 'passively benefiting at the expense of others' (passive), 'actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices' (active/legal), 'no harm/no foul' (no harm), and 'downloading copyrighted materials/buying counterfeit goods' (downloading); Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992, 2005). These tables clearly indicate that respondents' level of neutralization significantly explains their perception of the morally dubious consumer and corporate practices. The signs of the respective  $\beta$ -weights are all in the expected direction (i.e., positive) for both versions of our questionnaire. That is, the more respondents neutralize, the more likely they are to tolerate these questionable consumer and corporate practices.

Table 2a  
Results of regression analyses – Active/illegal

	Dependent variable: Active/illegal
NT consumer	.62***
NT corporation	.68***
R <sup>2</sup> consumer	.38
R <sup>2</sup> corporation	.47
F-value consumer	88.70***
F-value corporation	114.96***

\*\*\* $p < .001$

### Legend

Active/illegal: *Actively benefiting from illegal activities*

“A consumer/company returns a product to the supplier because it’s damaged. However, the damage was the fault of the consumer/company and not of the supplier.”

NT consumer: *Extent of neutralization in case of consumer scenario*

NT corporation: *Extent of neutralization in case of corporation scenario*

NT: *Mean score of the following five neutralization items:*

“The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action:

- because the products of the supplier often seem to be of low quality anyway (*denial of responsibility*)
- because the supplier does not suffer by one exchanged product (*denial of injury*)
- because the supplier wants to take back the product without tracing who’s to blame for the damage. That’s his problem (*denial of victim*)
- because other consumers/companies act in similar ways. Why wouldn’t this consumer/company be allowed to do so? (*condemning the condemners*)
- because he/she/the company only wants to possess the best materials (*appeal to higher loyalties*)”

*Table 2b*  
*Results of regression analyses – Passive*

	Dependent variable: Passive
NT consumer	.66***
NT corporation	.74***
R <sup>2</sup> consumer	.43
R <sup>2</sup> corporation	.55
F-value consumer	107.84***
F-value corporation	160.05***

\*\*\* $p < .001$

**Legend**

*Passive:* *Passively benefiting at the expense of others*

“A company needs to repay 40 euros on the bank account of a consumer/company. However, by inattention, the company pays 60 euros. The consumer/company notices this, but doesn’t say anything and keeps the extra 20 euros.”

*NT consumer:* *Extent of neutralization in case of consumer scenario*

*NT corporation:* *Extent of neutralization in case of corporation scenario*

*NT:* *Mean score of the following five neutralization items:*

“The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action:

- if the consumer/company wants to repay the money, but does not have the time to do so (*denial of responsibility*)
- because keeping the extra 20 euros is totally not severe and causes damage to nobody (*denial of injury*)
- because the company should have paid more attention to how much money they repaid, that’s not the fault of the consumer/company (*denial of victim*)
- because other consumers/companies would keep the money too (*condemning the condemners*)
- if the extra money supports a good cause (*appeal to higher loyalties*)”

Table 2c  
Results of regression analyses – Active/legal

	Dependent variable: Active/legal
NT consumer	.63***
NT corporation	.77***
R <sup>2</sup> consumer	.40
R <sup>2</sup> corporation	.59
F-value consumer	93.98***
F-value corporation	187.10***

\*\*\* $p < .001$

**Legend**

*Active/legal:* Actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices

“A consumer/company doesn’t tell the whole truth when negotiating with a car dealer about the price of a new vehicle.”

*NT consumer:* Extent of neutralization in case of consumer scenario

*NT corporation:* Extent of neutralization in case of corporation scenario

*NT:* Mean score of the following five neutralization items:

“The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action:

- in case the consumer/company would not be able to afford such an acquisition in any way (*denial of responsibility*)
- because the car dealer does not suffer by this action (*denial of injury*)
- as the car dealer himself/herself is responsible to check the verity of this information. It’s the fault of the car dealer himself/herself (*denial of victim*)
- because also other consumers/companies not always tell the truth when negotiating (*condemning the condemners*)
- if the consumer/company would otherwise get money problems (*appeal to higher loyalties*)”



*Table 2d*  
*Results of regression analyses – No harm*

	Dependent variable: No harm
NT consumer	.62***
NT corporation	.55***
R <sup>2</sup> consumer	.38
R <sup>2</sup> corporation	.30
F-value consumer	88.72***
F-value corporation	56.48***

\*\*\* $p < .001$

***Legend***

*No harm:*      *No harm/no foul*

“During some weeks, a consumer/company negotiates with an architect’s firm about the plans for a new accommodation, although the consumer/company is not yet completely sure about the cooperation with the firm and, maybe, will shrug off the building plan.”

*NT consumer:*    *Extent of neutralization in case of consumer scenario*

*NT corporation:* *Extent of neutralization in case of corporation scenario*

*NT:*                *Mean score of the following five neutralization items:*

“The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action:

- if the consumer/company has no other option than maybe shrugging off the building plan due to external factors (*denial of responsibility*)
- as it causes no damage to the architect’s firm to negotiate during some weeks, even if the consumer/company is not yet completely sure about the cooperation with that firm (*denial of injury*)
- because such a firm had to make a contract to ensure the cooperation (*denial of victim*)
- because other consumers/companies act in similar ways. Why wouldn’t this consumer/company be allowed to do so? (*condemning the condemners*)
- if the consumer/company strives for the best offer in the interest of its immediate vicinity (*appeal to higher loyalties*)”

*Table 2e*  
*Results of regression analyses – Downloading*

	Dependent variable: Downloading
NT consumer	.58***
NT corporation	.66***
R <sup>2</sup> consumer	.33
R <sup>2</sup> corporation	.44
F-value consumer	72.04***
F-value corporation	103.30***

\*\*\* $p < .001$

***Legend***

*Downloading:* Downloading copyrighted materials/buying counterfeit goods

“A consumer/company downloaded (copyrighted) software on one of his/her/its computers without paying for it.”

*NT consumer:* Extent of neutralization in case of consumer scenario

*NT corporation:* Extent of neutralization in case of corporation scenario

*NT:* Mean score of the following five neutralization items:

“The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action:

- if the consumer/company had no other option to obtain the software due to external factors (*denial of responsibility*)
- because software companies earn enough money and do not suffer by downloading without paying for it (*denial of injury*)
- because the software business shouldn't ask so much money to obtain their software (*denial of victim*)
- because other consumers/companies also do this (*condemning the condemners*)
- as knowledge development is a basic right (*appeal to higher loyalties*)”

Next to using an average neutralization score, we want to take into consideration the five distinct forms of neutralization (i.e., ‘denial of responsibility’, ‘denial of injury’, ‘denial of victim’, ‘condemning the condemners’, and ‘appeal to higher loyalties’). This might give us an idea about whether some neutralization techniques are more important than others in explaining the moral acceptability scores. Consequently, we repeat the above analyses with the distinct neutralization items. *Tables 3a-3e* represent – for each scenario (i.e., for each dimension of the Consumer Ethics Scale used in this study (i.e., ‘actively benefiting from illegal activities’ (active/illegal), ‘passively benefiting at the expense of others’ (passive), ‘actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices’ (active/legal), ‘no harm/no foul’ (no harm), and ‘downloading copyrighted materials/buying counterfeit goods’ (downloading)) – the results of the regression analyses between the separate neutralization items and the evaluation of the questionable consumer or corporate actions depicted in these respective scenarios. To illustrate, *Table 3b* shows that the regression coefficient for the relationship between the (extent to which respondents agree with the) ‘denial of injury’ statement and the evaluation of the ‘passively benefiting at the expense of others’ consumer misaction is equal to .63. The results of these extra analyses confirm what we already found. More specifically, the extent to which respondents agree with the various neutralization items relates positively to their judgment of the respective misactions. Further, these findings show no specific pattern in terms of which neutralization technique is systematically more or less salient in explaining the state of the double standards.

Table 3a  
Results of regression analyses – Active/illegal

	Dependent variables				
	DOR	DOI	DOV	CTC	ATHL
$\beta$ (consumer)	.41***	.63***	.48***	.35***	.43***
$\beta$ (corporation)	.62***	.60***	.51***	.46***	.44***
R <sup>2</sup> consumer	.17	.39	.23	.12	.18
R <sup>2</sup> corporation	.39	.36	.26	.21	.19
F-value consumer	29.45***	91.91***	43.43***	20.04***	31.97***
F-value corporation	82.36***	73.12***	46.76***	35.06***	31.41***

\*\*\* $p < .001$

**Legend**

- Active/illegal:* *Actively benefiting from illegal activities*  
 “A consumer/company returns a product to the supplier because it’s damaged. However, the damage was the fault of the consumer/company and not of the supplier.”
- DOR: Denial of responsibility: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because the products of the supplier often seem to be of low quality anyway”
- DOI: Denial of injury: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because the supplier does not suffer by one exchanged product”
- DOV: Denial of victim: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because the supplier wants to take back the product without tracing who’s to blame for the damage. That’s his problem”
- CTC: Condemning the condemners: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because other consumers/companies act in similar ways. Why wouldn’t this consumer/company be allowed to do so?”
- ATHL: Appeal to higher loyalties: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because he/she/the company only wants to possess the best materials”

Table 3b  
Results of regression analyses – Passive

	Dependent variables				
	DOR	DOI	DOV	CTC	ATHL
$\beta$ (consumer)	.31***	.63***	.62***	.46***	.32***
$\beta$ (corporation)	.41***	.62***	.67***	.59***	.45***
R <sup>2</sup> consumer	.10	.39	.38	.22	.10
R <sup>2</sup> corporation	.17	.39	.44	.34	.20
F-value consumer	15.15***	92.27***	88.33***	39.05***	16.06***
F-value corporation	26.58***	83.70***	104.06***	68.44***	33.38***

\*\*\* $p < .001$

**Legend**

- Passive:* *Passively benefiting at the expense of others*  
 “A company needs to repay 40 euros on the bank account of a consumer/company. However, by inattention, the company pays 60 euros. The consumer/company notices this, but doesn’t say anything and keeps the extra 20 euros.”
- DOR: Denial of responsibility: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action if the consumer/company wants to repay the money, but does not have the time to do so”
- DOI: Denial of injury: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because keeping the extra 20 euros is totally not severe and causes damage to nobody”
- DOV: Denial of victim: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because the company should have paid more attention to how much money they repaid, that’s not the fault of the consumer/company”
- CTC: Condemning the condemners: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because other consumers/companies would keep the money too”
- ATHL: Appeal to higher loyalties: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action if the extra money supports a good cause”

Table 3c  
Results of regression analyses – Active/legal

	Dependent variables				
	DOR	DOI	DOV	CTC	ATHL
$\beta$ (consumer)	.55***	.48***	.41***	.36***	.45***
$\beta$ (corporation)	.68***	.59***	.55***	.46***	.62***
R <sup>2</sup> consumer	.31	.23	.17	.13	.20
R <sup>2</sup> corporation	.46	.34	.31	.21	.39
F-value consumer	63.11***	41.61***	29.05***	20.77***	35.63***
F-value corporation	111.73***	68.54***	57.54***	35.08***	82.93***

\*\*\* $p < .001$

**Legend**

- Active/legal:* *Actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices*  
“A consumer/company doesn’t tell the whole truth when negotiating with a car dealer about the price of a new vehicle.”
- DOR: Denial of responsibility: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action in case the consumer/company would not be able to afford such an acquisition in any way”
- DOI: Denial of injury: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because the car dealer does not suffer by this action”
- DOV: Denial of victim: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action as the car dealer himself/herself is responsible to check the verity of this information. It’s the fault of the car dealer himself/herself”
- CTC: Condemning the condemners: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because also other consumers/companies not always tell the truth when negotiating “
- ATHL: Appeal to higher loyalties: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action if the consumer/company would otherwise get money problems”

Table 3d  
Results of regression analyses – No harm

	Dependent variables				
	DOR	DOI	DOV	CTC	ATHL
$\beta$ (consumer)	.24**	.54***	.45***	.32***	.45***
$\beta$ (corporation)	.28**	.42***	.51***	.22*	.43***
R <sup>2</sup> consumer	.06	.29	.20	.10	.20
R <sup>2</sup> corporation	.08	.17	.26	.05	.19
F-value consumer	8.84**	58.15***	36.50***	15.84	35.43***
F-value corporation	10.99**	27.61***	44.82***	6.35*	30.27***

\*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$

**Legend**

- No harm:* *No harm/no foul*  
“During some weeks, a consumer/company negotiates with an architect’s firm about the plans for a new accommodation, although the consumer/company is not yet completely sure about the cooperation with the firm and, maybe, will shrug off the building plan.”
- DOR: Denial of responsibility: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action if the consumer/company has no other option than maybe shrugging off the building plan due to external factors”
- DOI: Denial of injury: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action as it causes no damage to the architect’s firm to negotiate during some weeks, even if the consumer/company is not yet completely sure about the cooperation with that firm”
- DOV: Denial of victim: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because such a firm had to make a contract to ensure the cooperation”
- CTC: Condemning the condemners: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because other consumers/companies act in similar ways. Why wouldn’t this consumer/company be allowed to do so?”
- ATHL: Appeal to higher loyalties: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action if the consumer/company strives for the best offer in the interest of its immediate vicinity”

Table 3e  
Results of regression analyses – Downloading

	Dependent variables				
	DOR	DOI	DOV	CTC	ATHL
$\beta$ (consumer)	.37***	.43***	.44***	.36***	.44***
$\beta$ (corporation)	.28***	.56***	.49***	.44***	.54***
R <sup>2</sup> consumer	.14	.18	.19	.13	.19
R <sup>2</sup> corporation	.08	.31	.24	.19	.29
F-value consumer	22.90***	32.31***	33.44***	20.87***	34.05***
F-value corporation	11.27***	58.67***	41.67***	31.45***	52.78***

\*\*\* $p < .001$

**Legend**

**Downloading:** *Downloading copyrighted materials/buying counterfeit goods*  
“A consumer/company downloaded (copyrighted) software on one of his/her/its computers without paying for it.”

**DOR:** Denial of responsibility: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action if the consumer/company had no other option to obtain the software due to external factors”

**DOI:** Denial of injury: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because software companies earn enough money and do not suffer by downloading without paying for it”

**DOV:** Denial of victim: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because the software business shouldn’t ask so much money to obtain their software”

**CTC:** Condemning the condemners: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because other consumers/companies also do this”

**ATHL:** Appeal to higher loyalties: “The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action as knowledge development is a basic right”

The MANOVA testing the effect of ‘version’ (consumer versus corporation) on the extent of neutralization after each of the five scenarios (i.e., the dependent variables) clearly shows that respondents neutralize to a higher extent when judging unethical consumer practices compared to unethical corporate practices, *Wilks’ Lambda* = .63,  $F(5,272) = 32.55$ ,  $p < .001$ . Hence, consumers explain away consumers’ questionable actions with a certain degree, but condone the same mistreatment instigated by businesses to a much lesser extent. Findings confirm our central hypothesis for four out of five scenarios (see Table 4): ‘passively benefiting at the expense of others’ (passive), ‘actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices’ (active/legal), ‘no harm/no foul’ (no harm), and ‘downloading copyrighted materials/buying counterfeit goods’ (downloading). The degree to which respondents justify the questionable practices in case of the ‘actively benefiting from illegal



activities' scenario (active/illegal) does not significantly differ between the consumer and corporation version. This is also the scenario for which we do not find a double standard.

*Table 4*

*Mean values and standard deviations of extent of neutralization in case of five consumer or corporation scenarios*

	Consumer ( <i>N</i> = 145)		Corporation ( <i>N</i> = 133)		<i>p</i> -value
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Active/illegal	2.94	1.13	2.85	1.15	.53
Passive	3.70	1.23	2.18	.97	.00
Active/legal	3.53	1.10	2.61	1.07	.00
No harm	4.54	.94	4.30	1.00	.04
Downloading	4.04	1.17	3.40	1.05	.00

**Legend**

- Active/illegal:* *Actively benefiting from illegal activities*  
 “A consumer/company returns a product to the supplier because it’s damaged. However, the damage was the fault of the consumer/company and not of the supplier.”
- Passive:* *Passively benefiting at the expense of others*  
 “A company needs to repay 40 euros on the bank account of a consumer/company. However, by inattention, the company pays 60 euros. The consumer/company notices this, but doesn’t say anything and keeps the extra 20 euros.”
- Active/legal:* *Actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices*  
 “A consumer/company doesn’t tell the whole truth when negotiating with a car dealer about the price of a new vehicle.”
- No harm:* *No harm/no foul*  
 “During some weeks, a consumer/company negotiates with an architect’s firm about the plans for a new accommodation, although the consumer/company is not yet completely sure about the cooperation with the firm and, maybe, will shrug off the building plan.”
- Downloading:* *Downloading copyrighted materials/buying counterfeit goods*  
 “A consumer/company downloaded (copyrighted) software on one of his/her/its computers without paying for it.”

To examine whether there are any gender differences in the use of the neutralization techniques (in case of the various unethical consumer and/or corporate scenarios), we conduct a new MANOVA and add gender as a between-subjects factor. Results show neither a significant main effect of gender, *Wilks’ Lambda* = .98,  $F(5,270) = 1.28$ ,  $p > .05$ , nor a significant interaction of version with gender, *Wilks’ Lambda* = .96,  $F(5,270) = 2.10$ ,  $p > .05$ .

We again want to take into account the distinct forms of neutralization with regard to our central hypothesis. Therefore, we repeat these respective analyses with the distinct neutralization items. *Tables 5a-5e* show for each dimension of the Consumer Ethics Scale (Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992, 2005) used in this study (i.e., ‘actively benefiting from illegal activities’ (active/illegal), ‘passively benefiting at the expense of others’ (passive), ‘actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices’ (active/legal), ‘no harm/no foul’ (no harm), and ‘downloading copyrighted materials/buying counterfeit goods’ (downloading)) the results of the MANOVA testing the effect of ‘version’ (consumer versus corporation) on the extent to which respondents agree with each of the neutralization items (i.e., denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of victim, condemning the condemners, appeal to higher loyalties). Results show again no specific pattern in terms of which kind of neutralization technique is more or less salient in explaining the state of the double standards.

One can notice that only the ‘condemning the condemners’ neutralization technique generates a significant difference between the consumer and corporation version in case of the ‘no harm/no foul’ dimension. This latter ‘no harm/no foul’ dimension consists of actions that consumers consider as being permissible as they cause little or no harm (e.g., trying out clothing for two hours and, finally, not buying anything). Consequently, consumers might be likely to engage in these actions from time to time and believe that others also engage in this type of behavior at a regular base. This reasoning makes the above finding (i.e., only a significant difference for the condemning the condemners technique) concerning the ‘no harm/no foul’ dimension understandable. More specifically, it is more likely that people explain away negative behavior included in the no harm/no foul dimension by referring to neutralization techniques belonging to the condemning the condemners type as such techniques refer to the fact that the misbehavior is not wrong as others also regularly engage in this behavior.

Further, results indicate that for the dimensions depicting moderate questionable behavior (i.e., ‘passively benefiting at the expense of others’ and ‘actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices’), respondents consistently use all of the five neutralization techniques

significantly more in case of the consumer (versus corporation) version. Saliency of one specific form of neutralization is thus out of the question in comparing these consumer versus corporate scenarios.

*Table 5a*

*Mean values and standard deviations for neutralization items in case of active/illegal dimension*

	Consumer (N = 145)		Corporation (N = 133)		<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Denial of responsibility	3.30	1.62	3.27	1.58	.87
Denial of injury	3.01	1.52	2.83	1.50	.32
Denial of victim	3.64	1.73	3.55	1.78	.66
Condemning the condemners	2.37	1.33	2.13	1.26	.12
Appeal to higher loyalties	2.36	1.33	2.48	1.31	.44

*Wilks' Lambda* = .98 , *F*(5,272) = 1.11, *p* = .357

### ***Legend***

*Active/illegal:* *Actively benefiting from illegal activities*

"A consumer/company returns a product to the supplier because it's damaged. However, the damage was the fault of the consumer/company and not of the supplier."

### **Denial of responsibility:**

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because the products of the supplier often seem to be of low quality anyway"

### **Denial of injury:**

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because the supplier does not suffer by one exchanged product"

### **Denial of victim:**

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because the supplier wants to take back the product without tracing who's to blame for the damage. That's his problem"

### **Condemning the condemners:**

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because other consumers/companies act in similar ways. Why wouldn't this consumer/ company be allowed to do so?"

### **Appeal to higher loyalties:**

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because he/she/the company only wants to possess the best materials"

Table 5b

Mean values and standard deviations for neutralization items in case of passive dimension

	Consumer (N = 145)		Corporation (N = 133)		p
	M	SD	M	SD	
Denial of responsibility	3.58	1.59	2.36	1.36	.00
Denial of injury	3.46	1.66	1.71	.96	.00
Denial of victim	4.45	1.81	2.73	1.63	.00
Condemning the condemners	2.96	1.73	1.58	1.03	.00
Appeal to higher loyalties	4.06	1.86	2.52	1.64	.00

Wilks' Lambda = .66,  $F(5,272) = 27.59$ ,  $p = .000$

### Legend

*Passive:* *Passively benefiting at the expense of others*  
 "A company needs to repay 40 euros on the bank account of a consumer/company. However, by inattention, the company pays 60 euros. The consumer/company notices this, but doesn't say anything and keeps the extra 20 euros."

#### Denial of responsibility:

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action if the consumer/company wants to repay the money, but does not have the time to do so"

#### Denial of injury:

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because keeping the extra 20 euros is totally not severe and causes damage to nobody"

#### Denial of victim:

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because the company should have paid more attention to how much money they repaid, that's not the fault of the consumer/company"

#### Condemning the condemners:

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because other consumers/companies would keep the money too"

#### Appeal to higher loyalties:

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action if the extra money supports a good cause"

Table 5c

Mean values and standard deviations for neutralization items in case of active/legal dimension

	Consumer (N = 145)		Corporation (N = 133)		p
	M	SD	M	SD	
Denial of responsibility	3.71	1.56	2.71	1.36	.00
Denial of injury	3.60	1.56	2.75	1.46	.00
Denial of victim	3.99	1.59	2.93	1.62	.00
Condemning the condemners	2.88	1.50	1.98	1.20	.00
Appeal to higher loyalties	3.47	1.51	2.67	1.40	.00

Wilks' Lambda = .84,  $F(5,272) = 10.65$ ,  $p = .000$

#### Legend

Active/legal: Actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices  
 "A consumer/company doesn't tell the whole truth when negotiating with a car dealer about the price of a new vehicle."

#### Denial of responsibility:

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action in case the consumer/company would not be able to afford such an acquisition in any way"

#### Denial of injury:

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because the car dealer does not suffer by this action"

#### Denial of victim:

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action as the car dealer himself/herself is responsible to check the verity of this information. It's the fault of the car dealer himself/herself"

#### Condemning the condemners:

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because also other consumers/companies not always tell the truth when negotiating"

#### Appeal to higher loyalties:

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action if the consumer/company would otherwise get money problems"

Table 5d

Mean values and standard deviations for neutralization items in case of no harm dimension

	Consumer (N = 145)		Corporation (N = 133)		p
	M	SD	M	SD	
Denial of responsibility	5.21	1.32	4.93	1.47	.09
Denial of injury	4.07	1.66	4.11	1.56	.85
Denial of victim	4.66	1.51	4.43	1.46	.20
Condemning the condemners	3.26	1.65	2.80	1.63	.02
Appeal to higher loyalties	5.51	1.10	5.23	1.39	.06

Wilks' Lambda = .96,  $F(5,272) = 2.27$ ,  $p = .048$

### Legend

No harm: No harm/no foul

"During some weeks, a consumer/company negotiates with an architect's firm about the plans for a new accommodation, although the consumer/company is not yet completely sure about the cooperation with the firm and, maybe, will shrug off the building plan."

#### Denial of responsibility:

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action if the consumer/company has no other option than maybe shrugging off the building plan due to external factors"

#### Denial of injury:

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action as it causes no damage to the architect's firm to negotiate during some weeks, even if the consumer/company is not yet completely sure about the cooperation with that firm"

#### Denial of victim:

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because such a firm had to make a contract to ensure the cooperation"

#### Condemning the condemners:

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because other consumers/companies act in similar ways. Why wouldn't this consumer/company be allowed to do so?"

#### Appeal to higher loyalties:

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action if the consumer/company strives for the best offer in the interest of its immediate vicinity"

Table 5e

Mean values and standard deviations for neutralization items in case of downloading dimension

	Consumer (N = 145)		Corporation (N = 133)		p
	M	SD	M	SD	
Denial of responsibility	4.77	1.60	4.38	1.71	.06
Denial of injury	3.54	1.56	2.80	1.32	.00
Denial of victim	4.78	1.54	3.96	1.60	.00
Condemning the condemners	3.15	1.79	2.50	1.52	.00
Appeal to higher loyalties	3.98	1.69	3.34	1.50	.00

Wilks' Lambda = .91,  $F(5,272) = 5.20$ ,  $p = .000$

### Legend

**Downloading:** Downloading copyrighted materials/buying counterfeit goods  
 "A consumer/company downloaded (copyrighted) software on one of his/her/its computers without paying for it."

#### Denial of responsibility:

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action if the consumer/company had no other option to obtain the software due to external factors"

#### Denial of injury:

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because software companies earn enough money and do not suffer by downloading without paying for it"

#### Denial of victim:

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because the software business shouldn't ask so much money to obtain their software"

#### Condemning the condemners:

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action because other consumers/companies also do this"

#### Appeal to higher loyalties:

"The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action as knowledge development is a basic right"

## 6. Discussion

Previous studies show that consumers are tempted by the use of double standards. That is, consumers are likely to evaluate questionable practices more harshly when they are enacted by businesses compared to consumers. Empirical research about this phenomenon is limited (e.g., Rallapalli et al., 1994; Rawwas et al., 1994; Vitell et al., 1991; Vitell & Muncy, 1992), although it might be of great importance to the business world. Companies often do not consider double standards although they might have an interest in taking it into account (Vermeir & Van Kenhove, 2008). For

example, companies might assume that when consumers perceive a questionable corporate action as inadmissible, they believe the same action enacted by a consumer to be also inadmissible. However, as this research shows, consumers use double standards and, as a consequence, they might believe the same action enacted by a consumer to be admissible. Not taking this into account could lead to, for instance, less effective communication campaigns based on false knowledge about consumers' ethical perceptions.

A more extensive example might illustrate this contribution. Imagine that a certain company (A) appears in a bad light because it downloaded and used copyrighted software without paying for it. The respective software company (B) could see it as a good sign that the public opinion perceives this questionable downloading practice negatively. However, this study shows that consumers believe it is less inappropriate for them to illegally download software than it is for companies (i.e., a double standard). Hence, despite their negative perception of a company which illegally downloaded and used software, consumers themselves might be likely to engage in this questionable practice in the future. If the software company (B) had been aware of the probability of double standards, it could have anticipated on it (see later in this discussion).

Another reason why it is important for companies to consider double standards is that their engagement in unethical actions could initiate negative consumer attitudes. For example, if consumer research shows that consumers find an action enacted by consumers to be acceptable, this action enacted by the company is not necessarily perceived as acceptable by consumers.

Knowledge about possible explanatory factors of the double standard phenomenon is limited. The goal of the study reported in this chapter is to investigate whether the techniques of neutralization offer an explanation for the use of double standards. This study thus also contributes to the knowledge of the neutralization concept which is indicated as having much potential explanatory power in the study of consumers' ethical judgments (Vitell, 2003; Vitell & Muncy, 1992). Findings of this study state that the extent to which consumers use these techniques relates positively to their evaluation of questionable consumer and corporate actions. In other words, the higher the extent to which people agree with arguments explaining away misbehavior enacted by consumers or businesses, the more they tolerate this misbehavior. Furthermore and more importantly, these techniques give an answer on



the question why people judge businesses more harshly compared to consumers (i.e., why people use double standards). More specifically, results show that respondents who justify questionable actions of consumers to a certain degree, condone the same mistreatment enacted by businesses to a much lesser extent. In this way, the techniques of neutralization concern a process explaining the double standard phenomenon.

Returning to the specific example mentioned above in this discussion, company B could have anticipated the probability of consumers' illegal downloading practices by using a strategy emanating from the concept of neutralization techniques. These techniques enable consumers to develop and keep a biased characterization of a questionable action (in this case illegal software downloading) as being acceptable. Company B might decrease illegal downloading intentions and behavior by impeding consumers' abilities to construct these neutralization thoughts with regard to the illegal downloading and use of software. Hence, company B could, for example, design campaigns which disrupt consumers' neutralization oriented motivated cognitions, making it harder for them to deceive themselves that the act of illegal software downloading is acceptable (e.g., by showing the harmful consequences of illegal downloading practices to counter 'denial of injury' neutralizations; Bersoff, 1999).

### ***6.1. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research***

We want to end this discussion by pointing to some limitations which may give direction for future research. A first restriction concerns the sampling method used in this study. Using students is no exception in the consumer ethics area since they represent an important segment of consumers for many marketers (Chan, Wong, & Leung, 1998; Higgs-Kleyn, 1998; Muncy & Eastman, 1998; Rallapalli et al., 1994). At the same time, students enable researchers to control several sources of variation (Waller & Polonsky, 1999). However, a restriction of this sampling frame is that caution should be taken in trying to generalize the findings to other samples. Consequently, it would be worthwhile to investigate whether this study's findings hold when examining non-student populations.

Previous research shows people's tendency toward moral hypocrisy. That is, people are likely to evaluate moral transgressions less harshly when these transgressions are enacted by themselves than when these transgressions are enacted by others (e.g., Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007, 2008). The present study compares consumers' use of neutralization techniques with regard to questionable consumer versus business practices. It would be worthwhile to examine whether the results of this study extrapolate to a study that investigates people's use of neutralization techniques with regard to their own versus others'/other consumers' questionable practices.

Another limitation of our study might be the situation specificity of our results. Based on the Consumer Ethics Scale (Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992, 2005), we create different ethical scenarios as ethical judgments are situation specific (Barnett & Karson, 1987). The relative similarity of the results between the different scenarios indicates the generalizability of our findings. However, future research might include more and other situations in trying to confirm the results of this study. These further studies might benefit by using a different methodology than relying on the various dimensions of the Consumer Ethics Scale. Besides, it would be valuable to repeat this study and use different operationalizations for each neutralization technique in an attempt to generalize our findings.

To argument our central hypothesis (i.e., people neutralize more when confronted with unethical consumer behavior compared to unethical business behavior), we assume that people are more likely to apply the 'moral leniency' principle (i.e., engaging in unethical behavior and, at the same time, explaining away this behavior by using the techniques of neutralization) toward consumers as being part of their in-group compared to businesses as being part of their out-group. It might be interesting to investigate what would happen when the person evaluating the unethical consumer versus business behavior is an employee of the business that engages in this unethical behavior. In other words, what would be the result if the evaluator of the negative consumer and corporate behavior belongs to both the consumer and the business side? It could be that this particular factor moderates our central hypothesis so that no difference in neutralization (in case of the undesirable consumer versus corporate behavior) is expected when the evaluator is part of the company that engages in the questionable acts.

Finally, it would be interesting to not only get a better understanding of the double standard phenomenon, but also of the techniques of neutralization. Given the paucity of research about this topic as well as the potential to explain much as to why ‘ordinary people’ sometimes slip into unethical behavior, the techniques of neutralization seem capable of giving some direction for studying consumers’ ethical judgments and would be worthwhile to examine in more depth (Vitell, 2003). Additional research is needed about this concept by investigating which consumers show a higher propensity to use such techniques, in which circumstances, and to which degree. Gaining a fuller understanding of the cognitions making unethical behavior easier may suggest effective and generally applicable strategies for reducing questionable activities in which people too often indulge.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The words corporate/corporation, business, and company are used interchangeably in this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Similar to *Chapter 2*, we would like to make clear that, rather than running a full structural model and thus including control variables, we ran regression analyses without taking into account any control variable.

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## 8. Appendices

### 8.1. Appendix A: Scenarios and Neutralization Techniques – Dutch

#### **Actively benefiting from illegal activities**

Scenario: Een consument/bedrijf brengt een product terug naar de leverancier omdat het beschadigd is. De beschadiging is echter de fout van de consument/het bedrijf zelf en niet van de leverancier.

Neutralization techniques: De consument/het bedrijf treft geen schuld voor deze actie:

- aangezien de producten van de leverancier hoe dan ook al vaak van lage kwaliteit blijken te zijn (*denial of responsibility*)
- omdat de leverancier geen schade ondervindt van één omgeruild product (*denial of injury*)
- aangezien de leverancier het product wil terugnemen, zonder de schuld van de schade na te gaan. Dat is zijn probleem. (*denial of victim*)
- aangezien andere consumenten/bedrijven ook op zo'n manier handelen. Waarom zou deze consument/dit bedrijf dat dan niet mogen? (*condemning the condemners*)
- aangezien hij/zij/het bedrijf alleen maar het beste materiaal wil bezitten (*appeal to higher loyalties*)

#### **Passively benefiting at the expense of others**

Scenario: Een bedrijf dient 40 euro terug te storten op de rekening van een consument/bedrijf. Door onoplettendheid stort het bedrijf echter 60 euro. De consument/het bedrijf merkt dit, maar zegt dit niet en houdt de extra 20 euro.

Neutralization techniques: De consument/het bedrijf treft geen schuld voor deze actie:



- indien de consument/het bedrijf het geld wel wil terugstorten, maar de tijd niet heeft om dit uit te voeren (*denial of responsibility*)
- aangezien het houden van 20 euro helemaal niet erg is en niemand schade bezorgt (*denial of injury*)
- aangezien het bedrijf maar beter moet opletten hoeveel geld ze geeft, daar kan de consument/dit bedrijf niets aan doen (*denial of victim*)
- omdat andere consumenten/bedrijven het geld ook zouden houden (*condemning the condemners*)
- als het extra geld voor een goed doel dient (*appeal to higher loyalties*)

### **Actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices**

Scenario: Een consument/bedrijf vertelt niet de volledige waarheid bij het onderhandelen met een autohandelaar over de prijs voor een nieuw voertuig.

Neutralization techniques: De consument/het bedrijf treft geen schuld voor deze actie:

- wanneer de consument/het bedrijf op geen andere manier de aankoop zou kunnen veroorloven (*denial of responsibility*)
- aangezien de autohandelaar hiervan geen schade ondervindt (*denial of injury*)
- daar de autohandelaar zelf verantwoordelijk is voor het nagaan van de waarheid van de informatie. Het is de fout van de autohandelaar zelf (*denial of victim*)
- aangezien andere consumenten/bedrijven ook niet altijd de volledige waarheid vertellen bij het onderhandelen (*condemning the condemners*)
- indien de consument/het bedrijf anders in geldproblemen kan komen (*appeal to higher loyalties*)

### **No harm/no foul**

Scenario: Een consument/bedrijf onderhandelt gedurende enkele weken met een architectenbureau over de plannen voor een nieuwe huisvesting, hoewel de

consument/het bedrijf nog niet helemaal zeker is wat betreft de samenwerking met het bureau en het bouwplan misschien links zal laten liggen.

Neutralization techniques: De consument/het bedrijf treft geen schuld voor deze actie:

- indien de consument/het bedrijf door externe factoren niet anders kan dan de plannen van het bureau eventueel links te laten liggen (*denial of responsibility*)
- daar het helemaal geen schade toebrengt aan het architectenbureau om enkele weken te onderhandelen, zelfs al is de consument/het bedrijf nog niet zeker van de samenwerking met het bureau (*denial of injury*)
- aangezien zo'n bureau maar een contract had moeten opstellen om zekerheid te hebben over de samenwerking (*denial of victim*)
- aangezien andere consumenten/bedrijven evengoed zo handelen. Waarom zou deze consument/dit bedrijf dat dan niet mogen? (*condemning the condemners*)
- wanneer de consument/het bedrijf voor de beste offerte gaat in het belang van de directe omgeving (*appeal to higher loyalties*)

### **Downloading copyrighted materials/buying counterfeit goods**

Scenario: Een consument/bedrijf heeft op één van zijn/haar computers (auteursrechtelijk beschermde) software gedownload zonder hiervoor te betalen.

Neutralization techniques: De consument/het bedrijf treft geen schuld voor deze actie:

- indien de consument/het bedrijf door externe factoren geen andere mogelijkheid had om aan de software te geraken (*denial of responsibility*)
- aangezien de softwarebedrijven genoeg geld verdienen en zij geen schade ondervinden bij onbetaald downloaden (*denial of injury*)
- omdat de softwarebusiness maar niet zoveel geld moet vragen voor hun software (*denial of victim*)

- aangezien andere consumenten/bedrijven dit even goed doen (*condemning the condemners*)
- daar kennisontwikkeling een basisrecht is (*appeal to higher loyalties*)

## 8.2. Appendix B: Scenarios and Neutralization Techniques – English

### Actively benefiting from illegal activities

Scenario: A consumer/company returns a product to the supplier because it's damaged. However, the damage was the fault of the consumer/company and not of the supplier.

Neutralization techniques: The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action:

- because the products of the supplier often seem to be of low quality anyway (*denial of responsibility*)
- because the supplier does not suffer by one exchanged product (*denial of injury*)
- because the supplier wants to take back the product without tracing who's to blame for the damage. That's his problem (*denial of victim*)
- because other consumers/companies act in similar ways. Why wouldn't this consumer/ company be allowed to do so? (*condemning the condemners*)
- because he/she/the company only wants to possess the best materials (*appeal to higher loyalties*)

### Passively benefiting at the expense of others

Scenario: A company needs to repay 40 euros on the bank account of a consumer/company. However, by inattention, the company pays 60 euros. The consumer/company notices this, but doesn't say anything and keeps the extra 20 euros.

Neutralization techniques: The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action:

- if the consumer/company wants to repay the money, but does not have the time to do so (*denial of responsibility*)
- because keeping the extra 20 euros is totally not severe and causes damage to nobody (*denial of injury*)

- because the company should have paid more attention to how much money they repaid, that's not the fault of the consumer/company (*denial of victim*)
- because other consumers/companies would keep the money too (*condemning the condemners*)
- if the extra money supports a good cause (*appeal to higher loyalties*)

### **Actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices**

Scenario: A consumer/company doesn't tell the whole truth when negotiating with a car dealer about the price of a new vehicle.

Neutralization techniques: The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action:

- in case the consumer/company would not be able to afford such an acquisition in any way (*denial of responsibility*)
- because the car dealer does not suffer by this action (*denial of injury*)
- as the car dealer himself/herself is responsible to check the verity of this information. It's the fault of the car dealer himself/herself (*denial of victim*)
- because also other consumers/companies not always tell the truth when negotiating (*condemning the condemners*)
- if the consumer/company would otherwise get money problems (*appeal to higher loyalties*)

### **No harm/no foul**

Scenario: During some weeks, a consumer/company negotiates with an architect's firm about the plans for a new accommodation, although the consumer/company is not yet completely sure about the cooperation with the firm and, maybe, will shrug off the building plan.

Neutralization techniques: The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action:

- if the consumer/company has no other option than maybe shrugging off the building plan due to external factors (*denial of responsibility*)
- as it causes no damage to the architect's firm to negotiate during some weeks, even if the consumer/company is not yet completely sure about the cooperation with that firm (*denial of injury*)
- because such a firm had to make a contract to ensure the cooperation (*denial of victim*)
- because other consumers/companies act in similar ways. Why wouldn't this consumer/company be allowed to do so? (*condemning the condemners*)
- if the consumer/company strives for the best offer in the interest of its immediate vicinity (*appeal to higher loyalties*)

#### **Downloading copyrighted materials/buying counterfeit goods**

Scenario: A consumer/company downloaded (copyrighted) software on one of his/her/its computers without paying for it.

Neutralization techniques: The consumer/company should not be blamed for this action:

- if the consumer/company had no other option to obtain the software due to external factors (*denial of responsibility*)
- because software companies earn enough money and do not suffer by downloading without paying for it (*denial of injury*)
- because the software business shouldn't ask so much money to obtain their software (*denial of victim*)
- because other consumers/companies also do this (*condemning the condemners*)
- as knowledge development is a basic right (*appeal to higher loyalties*)







## **Chapter 5:**

**“What’s the harm in being unethical? These strangers are rich anyway!”**

**Exploring Underlying Factors of Double Standards**

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This chapter is based on De Bock, T., Vermeir, I., & Van Kenhove, P. (*accepted for publication*).

“What’s the harm in being unethical? These strangers are rich anyway!” Exploring underlying factors of double standards. *Journal of Business Ethics*.



## Chapter 5:

### “What’s the harm in being unethical? These strangers are rich anyway!”

#### Exploring Underlying Factors of Double Standards

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##### 1. Abstract

Previous research shows evidence for double standards as individuals tolerate questionable consumer practices more compared to similar business practices. However, researchers wondered whether these double standards are necessarily due to the fact that one party is a business company while the other is a consumer. Results of the studies reported in this chapter demonstrate that individuals were not only harsher for unethical business (versus consumer) behavior, but also for unethical behavior by prosperous (versus non-prosperous) consumers and prosperous (versus non-prosperous) business companies (Study 1). Further, they were also less tolerant of unethical behavior by consumers (versus one’s best friend) and business companies with which they have a not so good (versus a good) relationship (Study 2).

These results indicate that double standards are due to differences in perceived wealth between subjects<sup>1</sup> and in one’s relationship with subjects. These two factors imply that double standards are not strictly reserved to consumer-business relations, but might be used in business-business and consumer-consumer relations too. Further, these results indicate that companies need to be aware of the fact that good financial figures may backfire as they might lead individuals to have a more critical view on companies’ deceptive practices. Moreover, these findings point to the importance for businesses to keep investing energy in developing high relationship commitment with stakeholders as these good relationships lead stakeholders to be less morally condemning of their questionable practices.

Keywords: consumer ethics, business ethics, double standards, ethical beliefs, marketing ethics, moral hypocrisy, relationship, wealth

## 2. Introduction

Previous research shows evidence for double standards as individuals tolerate questionable consumer practices more compared to similar business practices (DePaulo, 1985, 1987; Vermeir & Van Kenhove, 2008; see *Chapter 4*). However, already in his 1987 paper, DePaulo wondered whether these double standards are necessarily due to the fact that one party is a business company while the other is a consumer. More specifically, he pointed to ‘wealth’ as a possible underlying factor: “Perhaps the critical variable is actually the perceived wealth or vulnerability of the negotiating party” (p. 103). Furthermore, DePaulo (1987) implicitly raises ‘relationship’ as another possible underlying factor of double standards.

The purpose of this study is to give a decisive answer about these issues by exploring these two possible underlying factors (i.e., wealth and relationship) of the double standard phenomenon other than the mere fact of being a business or a consumer. First, business misbehavior may be regarded as less acceptable compared to similar consumer misbehavior because businesses are perceived as being more financially secure and hence less in need of gaining additional financial benefit through deceptive practices (DePaulo, 1987). This would imply that individuals also use double standards when evaluating questionable behavior enacted by prosperous versus non-prosperous consumers, and prosperous versus non-prosperous business companies. Second, it might be that individuals tolerate unethical consumer behavior more compared to unethical business behavior because they feel a closer relationship with consumers compared to business companies (cf. DePaulo, 1987). This would imply that individuals also use double standards when evaluating questionable behavior enacted by consumers with which they have a good relationship (e.g., their best friends) versus a not so good relationship, and business companies with which they have a good relationship versus a not so good relationship. In other words, if these two underlying factors (which we label as ‘wealth’ and ‘relationship’ in the rest of this chapter) determine the use of double standards, this would imply that the use of double standards is not strictly reserved to consumer-business relations, but might be used in business-business and consumer-consumer relations too.

### **3. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses**

#### ***3.1. Double Standards: Consumers versus Business***

Business ethics studies “deal with questions about whether specific business practices are acceptable” (Ferrell, Fraedrich, & Ferrell, 2008, p. 5)”, while consumer ethics deals with the “rightness as opposed to the wrongness of certain actions on the part of the buyer or potential buyer in consumer situations” (Dodge, Edwards, & Fullerton, 1996, p. 823). In this business ethics versus consumer ethics realm, double standards involve the investigation of potential differences between how unethical business practices are perceived compared to similar consumer practices. Business literature suggests that individuals judge the behavior of business (representatives) more harshly than similar behavior of individual consumers (e.g., Wilkes, 1978). Drucker (1981) even maintains that a double standard is implicit in the treatment of “business ethics” and “business social responsibility” as topics separate from ethics in general. Specifically, he argues that “business ethics” means holding business to a different standard of conduct than “ordinary people”.

In order to demonstrate double standards empirically, DePaulo (1985) conducts a telephone survey in which respondents have to indicate whether they feel that similar misconduct of a salesperson and a consumer is wrong. Results show that 8 percent openly admits to a double standard by maintaining that deception is wrong for the salesperson but not for the consumer. DePaulo (1987) argues that this 8 percent figure probably underestimates the prevalence of double standards, because respondents holding double standards may realize their inconsistency and find it embarrassing or because the study does not investigate the degree of perceived wrongness. In trying to avoid these problems, a follow-up study (DePaulo, 1987) uses a between-groups design involving two versions of an anonymous questionnaire where subjects have to evaluate an automobile salesperson or a customer using similar deceptive bargaining tactics. Results indicate that consumers are more critical of sellers who engage in potentially unethical behavior than they are of buyers who engage in the same practices.

A recent study by Vermeir and Van Kenhove (2008) as well as the results reported in *Chapter 4* confirm the previous work of DePaulo (1985, 1987) by showing that consumers have a double standard when it comes to their own unethical behavior compared to that of a corporation. More specifically, individuals evaluate unethical corporate actions as more unacceptable compared to similar unethical consumer actions.

### ***3.2. 'Wealth' as an Underlying Factor of Double Standards***

Several social preference models like those of Loewenstein, Thompson and Bazerman (1989), Messick (1995), and Fehr and Schmidt (1999) indicate people's general aversion to inequality. Situations which are marked by inequality evoke feelings of unfairness and injustice which people like to restore or compensate for in one way or another. This idea of individuals preferring a situation marked by any type of balance and their likeliness to restore any imbalance, can be traced back in other theories such as the Just World Theory (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Miller, 1978) and the System Justification Theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004).

The Just World Theory (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Miller, 1978) puts forward that individuals show a general need to believe that the world is just, orderly, and stable. Many individuals feel a need to perceive the world as just in which rewards and punishments are distributed in correct ways. Previous studies applying the Just World Theory show that when individuals' belief in a just world is endangered, they are likely to use defensive responses such as dismissal or justifying the information that caused the threatening of their belief in a just world (see Furnham, 1993; Hafer & Bégue, 2005).

In a similar vein, research explaining the System Justification Theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2004) shows people's general tendency to dislike inequality and to believe in a just world. Research based on this theory shows people's general tendency to enhance disadvantaged entities with compensating virtues while acting the opposite in case of advantaged entities (Kay & Jost, 2003; Kay et al., 2007). This latter tendency resembles research about people's tendency to sympathize with and support entities more when they are perceived as underdogs (Goldschmied & Vandello, 2009; Kim et al., 2008; Vandello, Goldschmied, & Richards, 2007).

A recent study by Vandello, Michniewicz, and Goldschmied (2011) is in line with the theories mentioned above. More specifically, they investigated how power disparities influence judgments of the morality of conflicting groups. They found that actions of disempowered groups have greater moral license compared to actions of powerful groups. People judge the violent actions of a fictitious group as more moral when done by a smaller, less powerful group compared to a larger one. These findings are in line with research about people's tendency to sympathize with and support entities more when they are perceived as underdogs (Goldschmied & Vandello, 2009; Kim et al., 2008; Vandello et al., 2007), research about people's general tendency to be averse to inequalities (Fehr & Schmidt, 1999; Messick, 1995), research about dismissing and justifying information that threatens a just world belief (Furnham, 1993; Hafer & Bégue, 2005), and system justification research suggesting a general tendency to enhance disadvantaged entities with compensating virtues (Kay & Jost, 2003; Kay et al., 2007).

Whenever there is financial inequality between subjects<sup>1</sup>, we might assume, based on the related ideas mentioned above, that people would be prone to restore this financial inequality in one way or another. One possible way to restore this financial imbalance might be to be more morally lenient toward the financially less powerful subjects compared to the financially more powerful subjects. In other words, perceptions of financial inequality could trigger feelings of unfairness and injustice, or subjects who are perceived financially less (versus more) powerful can be seen as disadvantaged, the underdog, or disempowered, causing compensating responses. As consumers are generally perceived as financially less powerful compared to companies, we hypothesize that individuals would be likely to compensate this financial inequality by being more morally lenient toward consumers compared to businesses.

Stated otherwise, double standards may not necessarily be due to the fact that one party is a business company while the other party is a consumer, but might be the result of the fact that individuals perceive business companies as wealthier than consumers, and thus less in need of financial gain through unethical practices (DePaulo, 1987). If wealth perceptions are underlying double standards, people should also use double standards when rating questionable behavior of

prosperous versus non-prosperous consumers, or prosperous versus non-prosperous business companies.

Gino and colleagues recently examined the role of inequity perceptions in dishonest behavior (e.g., Gino & Pierce, 2010a, 2010b). Their experiments demonstrate that perceptions of financial inequity motivate dishonest helping or dishonest hurting behavior. More specifically, their findings indicate that people engage in unethical behavior that helps others when these others are financially less capable. People engage in unethical hurting behavior, on the other hand, when these others are financially more capable. This study extends these findings by suggesting that people are not only more likely to dishonestly help less (versus more) wealthy subjects, but that those individuals are also more morally lenient toward questionable practices enacted by these less (versus more) wealthy subjects. Consequently, this study might show that situations marked by financial inequality not only influence one's own immoral behavior, but also one's judgment of others' immoral behavior in case these others are more or less financially capable. In sum, we propose the following three hypotheses which will be tested in the first study:

Hypothesis 1a: Consumers perceive unethical practices as less acceptable when these actions are enacted by a prosperous subject than when these actions are enacted by a non-prosperous subject.

Hypothesis 1b: Consumers perceive unethical practices as less acceptable when these actions are enacted by a prosperous consumer than when these actions are enacted by a non-prosperous consumer.

Hypothesis 1c: Consumers perceive unethical practices as less acceptable when these actions are enacted by a prosperous business company than when these actions are enacted by a non-prosperous business company.



### 3.3. *'Relationship' as an Underlying Factor of Double Standards*

Social Identity Theory developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979) postulates that individuals give meaning to their self-concept by means of their connections with social groups. In other words, people hold various “social identities” which they derive from their (perceived) membership of various social groups. Based on their social identity, people are likely to divide the world into “them” and “us” ultimately leading to the development of so-called in-group favouritism at the expense of out-groups. The process of categorizing oneself in terms of a particular social identity results in people being likely to emphasize and exaggerate the similarities between the self and in-group members and the differences between the self and out-group members.

Banaji, Bazerman, and Chugh (2003) cite this in-group favouritism as one of the sources of (un)ethical decision making. People apply different standards of morality to in-groups and out-groups despite the existence of shared principles (Vandello et al., 2011). More specifically, people are more morally lenient toward in-group members compared to out-group members (Gino, Gu, & Zhong, 2009; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007).

This particular finding about the role of in-group favouritism in the moral domain might be useful in the context of studying double standards. Previous research never examined whether double standards are necessarily about consumers *versus* businesses. The research of Banaji et al. (2003) suggests that this is not the case. More specifically, individuals might be more likely to perceive other consumers as in-group members while perceiving business companies rather as out-group members (cf. *Chapter 4*). As a consequence, they might be more morally lenient toward consumers compared to businesses, which thus results in consumers using a double standard. In case people would perceive a business company to belong to their in-group, they might become morally less harsh for this company compared to a company that belongs to their out-group. Or, in case people perceive a consumer to belong to their out-group, they might be more morally condemning of their questionable behavior than when this behavior is enacted by a consumer that belongs to their in-group. Taken this into account, this means that double standards are not restricted to business-consumer relations, but extend to other relations (e.g., consumer-consumer, business-business) as well.

In other words, people might judge unethical consumer behavior more positively compared to similar unethical business behavior (i.e., double standards) because they feel a closer relationship with and consequently are less strict for consumers compared to businesses. If this ‘relationship factor’ underlies the double standard phenomenon, this would mean that people should also use double standards when they rate questionable behavior of a consumer with which they have a not so good relationship versus a consumer with which they have a good relationship (e.g., their best friend), or when they compare a business company with which they have a not so good relationship versus a business company with which they have a good relationship.

This proposition is in line with and extends research of Van Kenhove, De Wulf, and Steenhaut (2003) and Steenhaut and Van Kenhove (2005). Results of these studies show significant correlations between affective commitment to a store and various aspects of unethical behavior toward that store. More specifically, highly committed customers report less unethical behavior compared to lowly committed customers. This study clearly indicates that the relationship one has with a company translates into more moral behavior toward that company. We expect that these findings extrapolate to our study meaning that people not only behave more ethically toward a company when having a better relationship with it, but that they are also more morally lenient toward that specific company when this company engages in unethical behavior. Similarly, we might expect that people are more morally lenient toward people with which they have a good relationship compared to people with which they have a not so good relationship. Consequently, we propose the following hypotheses which will be tested in Study 2:

Hypothesis 2a: Consumers perceive unethical practices as less acceptable when these actions are enacted by a subject with which they have a not so good relationship than when these actions are enacted by a subject with which they have a good relationship.

Hypothesis 2b: Consumers perceive unethical practices as less acceptable when these actions are enacted by a consumer than when these actions are enacted by their best friend.

Hypothesis 2c: Consumers perceive unethical practices as less acceptable when these actions are enacted by a business company with which they have a not so good relationship than when these actions are enacted by a business company with which they have a good relationship.

#### **4. Study 1**

The goal of Study 1 is to test the hypotheses dealing with ‘wealth’ as an underlying factor of double standards. We postulate three hypotheses. First of all, we expect individuals to judge unethical practices done by a prosperous subject as less acceptable compared to unethical practices done by a non-prosperous subject (i.e., Hypothesis 1a). Second, we hypothesize that individuals perceive unethical practices as less acceptable when these practices are performed by a prosperous consumer than when these actions are performed by a non-prosperous consumer (i.e., Hypothesis 1b). Third, we assume that individuals evaluate unethical practices as less acceptable when these practices are enacted by a prosperous business company compared to a non-prosperous business company (i.e., Hypothesis 1c). Below, we elaborate on the sample and methodology we used in this first study. Afterwards, the results are explained in more detail.

##### ***4.1. Sample and Procedure***

In total, 277 participants between 18 and 70 ( $M = 32.67$ ,  $SD = 14.20$ ) participated in our anonymous self-administered online questionnaire. *Table 1* depicts the socio-demographic characteristics of this sample in terms of gender, age, education, and income. Although not having used a student sample, this table indicates that a large part of our sample do consist of students

*Table 1*  
*Study 1: Sample characteristics*

		<i>N</i>	%
<u>Gender*</u>	Male	84	30.3
	Female	193	69.7
<u>Age*</u>	≤ 24	125	45.1
	25 - 34	59	21.3
	35 - 44	24	8.7
	45 - 54	34	12.3
	≥ 55	35	12.6
<u>Education**</u>	Primary education	0	.0
	Lower secondary education	10	6.4
	Higher secondary education	38	24.2
	Higher (non-university) education	57	36.3
	Higher university education	45	28.7
	Postgraduate education	7	4.5
<u>Income**</u>	< 500 euro	0	.0
	500 - 1000 euro	4	2.5
	1001 - 1500 euro	31	19.7
	1501 - 2000 euro	56	35.7
	2001 - 2500 euro	22	14.0
	2501 - 3000 euro	10	6.4
	3001 - 3500 euro	4	2.5
	> 3500 euro	4	2.5
	I have (currently) no income	5	3.2
	I'd rather not say this	21	13.4

\*Total sample: *N* = 277 (Non-students: *N* = 157; Students: *N* = 120); \*\*Non-students: *N* = 157

(i.e.,  $N = 120$  or 43.3%). Consequently, the sample depicts a relative overrepresentation of younger people. Furthermore, women are also relatively overrepresented ( $N = 193$  or 69.7%).

Each participant was randomly assigned to one of four conditions of our 2 (subject: consumer versus business) by 2 (wealth: prosperous versus non-prosperous) between-subjects design. We assigned each respondent to only one of four conditions (i.e., *between*-subjects design) to avoid the problem of respondents being unwilling to admit their inconsistency when using a double standard (cf. DePaulo, 1987). Every condition was similar in that sense that each participant had to read five scenarios (see *Appendix A* for the original Dutch scenarios and *Appendix B* for the English translation of these original scenarios), presented in a random order, depicting questionable practices. The five dimensions of the Consumer Ethics Scale (Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992, 2005) dealing with unethical behavior (i.e., actively benefiting from illegal activities, passively benefiting at the expense of others, actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices, no harm/no foul, and downloading copyrighted materials/buying counterfeit goods; see *Chapter 1: Introduction*) form the basis for these scenarios.

The first scenario concerns the practice of bringing back a damaged product to the supplier while the damage is one's own fault instead of the supplier's fault (i.e., 'actively benefiting from illegal activities'). The second scenario deals with saying nothing when a supplier repays too much money on one's bank account (i.e., 'passively benefiting at the expense of others'). Third, participants read a scenario about not telling the whole truth while negotiating with a car dealer about the price of new vehicle (i.e., 'actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices'). A fourth scenario depicts the practice of negotiating during some weeks with an architect's firm about the plans for a new accommodation although not being completely sure about the cooperation with the firm (i.e., 'no harm/no foul'). A final scenario deals with the downloading of copyrighted software without paying for it (i.e., 'downloading copyrighted materials/buying counterfeit goods').

So each participant in each of the four conditions had to evaluate these five questionable practices (i.e., five scenarios). The only difference between each of the four conditions was in terms of the subject engaging in these five questionable practices. More specifically, the subject was either 'a

prosperous consumer', 'a non-prosperous consumer', 'a prosperous company', or 'a non-prosperous company'.

After reading a scenario depicting a questionable practice, participants had to indicate how acceptable they believed the depicted behavior to be on a seven-point Likert scale going from (1) 'completely unacceptable' to (7) 'completely acceptable'. Consequently, higher scores indicate a more tolerant and thus less ethical judgment. This procedure was repeated for all five scenarios which each depicted a different questionable practice (cf. *supra*). As we are interested in the overall result (and not in the results for each scenario separately) and want to rule out situation specific influences, the dependent variable for each participant consists of the mean score of his/her five acceptability scores ( $\alpha = .64$ ).

#### **4.2. Results**

To test Hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 1c, we conducted an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with 'subject' (consumer versus business) and 'wealth' (prosperous versus non-prosperous) as the between-subjects independent variables, and the mean acceptability score (i.e., the mean score of respondents' five acceptability scores) as the dependent variable.

A significant main effect of subject,  $F(1,273) = 36.37$ ,  $p < .001$ , shows that overall, participants evaluate consumers ( $M = 3.94$ ;  $SD = 1.00$ ) less harshly compared to business companies ( $M = 3.26$ ;  $SD = .90$ ). In other words and in line with previous research (e.g., Vermeir & Van Kenhove, 2008), respondents judge unethical consumer practices as less unethical than similar unethical business practices.

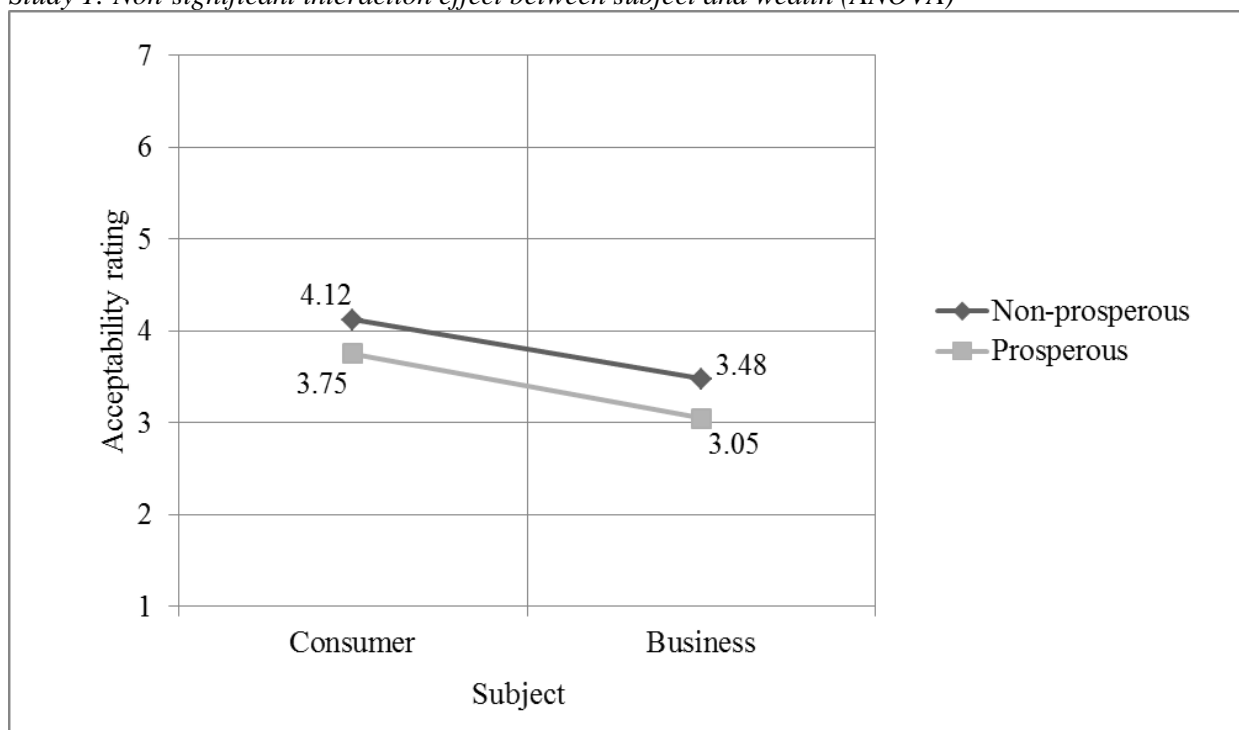
Further, a main effect of wealth,  $F(1,273) = 12.91$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicates that in general, respondents are less intolerant toward questionable practices enacted by subjects that are financially less capable ( $M = 3.80$ ;  $SD = .90$ ) compared to subjects that are financially more capable ( $M = 3.40$ ;  $SD = 1.06$ ). Consequently, Hypothesis 1a is supported.

Finally, findings show no significant interaction effect between subject and wealth,  $F(1,273) = .08$ ,  $p > .05$ . *Figure 1* clearly indicates this non-significant interaction. This figure, however, clearly

shows that in case of judging consumers, respondents judge unethical practices more harshly when these practices are done by a prosperous consumer ( $M = 3.75$ ;  $SD = 1.03$ ) than when these practices are done by a non-prosperous consumer ( $M = 4.12$ ;  $SD = .92$ ),  $F(1,273) = 5.32$ ,  $p < .05$ . These results show evidence for Hypothesis 1b. Further, in case of judging businesses, participants are more critical of unethical actions done by prosperous businesses ( $M = 3.05$ ;  $SD = .98$ ) compared to unethical actions done by non-prosperous businesses ( $M = 3.48$ ;  $SD = .76$ ),  $F(1,273) = 7.73$ ,  $p < .01$ . These findings confirm Hypothesis 1c.

*Figure 1*

*Study 1: Non-significant interaction effect between subject and wealth (ANOVA)*



In sum, results of Study 1 indicate that the use of double standards (i.e., individuals tolerating unethical consumer practices more than similar business practices) is not necessarily due to the fact that one party is a consumer while the other is a business company. More specifically, findings demonstrate that consumers were not only harsher for unethical business (versus consumer) behavior (i.e., double standards as traditionally studied), but also for unethical behavior by prosperous (versus non-prosperous) consumers, and unethical behavior by prosperous (versus non-prosperous) business companies. These results indicate that double standards are due to differences in perceived wealth

between subjects engaging in immoral behavior. This ‘wealth’ factor implies that the use of double standards is not strictly reserved to consumer-business relations, but might be used in business-business and consumer-consumer relations too.

## **5. Study 2**

Study 1 shows evidence for ‘wealth’ as an underlying factor of double standards. The aim of this second study is to test the hypotheses dealing with ‘relationship’ as an underlying factor of double standards. A first assumption to be tested postulates that individuals are more tolerant of unethical practices when they are enacted by a subject with which they have a good relationship than when these practices are enacted by a subject with which they have a not so good relationship (i.e., Hypothesis 2a). We further assume that individuals judge questionable practices as less acceptable when these actions are performed by a consumer than when these actions are performed by their best friend (i.e., Hypothesis 2b). Finally, we hypothesize that individuals tolerate unethical actions less when these actions are performed by a business company with which they have a not so good relationship compared to a business company with which they have a good relationship (i.e., Hypothesis 2c). Before elaborating on the results, we explain the sample and procedure we used (which is similar to that used in Study 1) in more detail.

### ***5.1. Sample and Procedure***

In total, 264 participants between 17 and 73 ( $M = 32.72$ ,  $SD = 13.69$ ) participated in our anonymous self-administered online questionnaire. *Table 2* depicts the socio-demographic characteristics of this sample in terms of gender, age, education, and income. Although not having used a student sample, this table indicates that a large part of our sample do consist of students (i.e.,  $N = 110$  or 41.7%) and thus younger people. Furthermore, women are also overrepresented ( $N = 199$  or 75.4%).



Table 2  
Study 2: Sample characteristics

		N	%
<u>Gender*</u>	Male	65	24.6
	Female	199	75.4
<u>Age*</u>	≤ 24	118	44.7
	25 - 34	52	19.7
	35 - 44	28	10.6
	45 - 54	43	16.3
	≥ 55	23	8.7
<u>Education**</u>	Primary education	3	1.9
	Lower secondary education	5	3.2
	Higher secondary education	23	14.9
	Higher (non-university) education	67	43.5
	Higher university education	45	29.2
	Postgraduate education	11	7.1
<u>Income**</u>	< 500 euro	1	.6
	500 - 1000 euro	4	2.6
	1001 - 1500 euro	26	16.9
	1501 - 2000 euro	53	34.4
	2001 - 2500 euro	18	11.7
	2501 - 3000 euro	13	8.4
	3001 - 3500 euro	5	3.2
	> 3500 euro	4	2.6
	I have (currently) no income	11	7.1
	I'd rather not say this	19	12.3

\*Total sample:  $N = 264$  (Non-students:  $N = 154$ ; Students:  $N = 110$ ); \*\*Non-students:  $N = 154$

Each participant was randomly assigned to one of four conditions of our 2 (subject: consumer versus business) by 2 (relationship: not good versus good) between-subjects design. We used this *between-subjects* design (i.e., assigning each respondent to only one of four conditions) to avoid the problem of respondents being unwilling to admit their inconsistency when using a double standard (cf. DePaulo 1987). In every condition, participants had to read five scenarios (see *Appendix A* for the original Dutch scenarios and *Appendix B* for the English translation of these original scenarios), presented in a random order, which each depicted a questionable practice based on one of the five dimensions of the Consumer Ethics Scale (Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992, 2005; see *Chapter 1: Introduction*). As these practices are identical to those used in Study 1, we do not recapitulate them in this section.

The only difference between each of the four conditions was in terms of the subject engaging in these five questionable practices to be judged. More specifically, the subject was either ‘a consumer’, ‘one’s best friend’, ‘a company with which one has a not so good relationship’, or ‘a company with which one has a good relationship’.

After going through a scenario, participants had to indicate how acceptable they believed the depicted behavior in that scenario to be on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from (1) ‘completely unacceptable’ to (7) ‘completely acceptable’. This procedure was repeated for all five scenarios. The dependent variable consists of the mean acceptability score ( $\alpha = .64$ ).

## **5.2. Results**

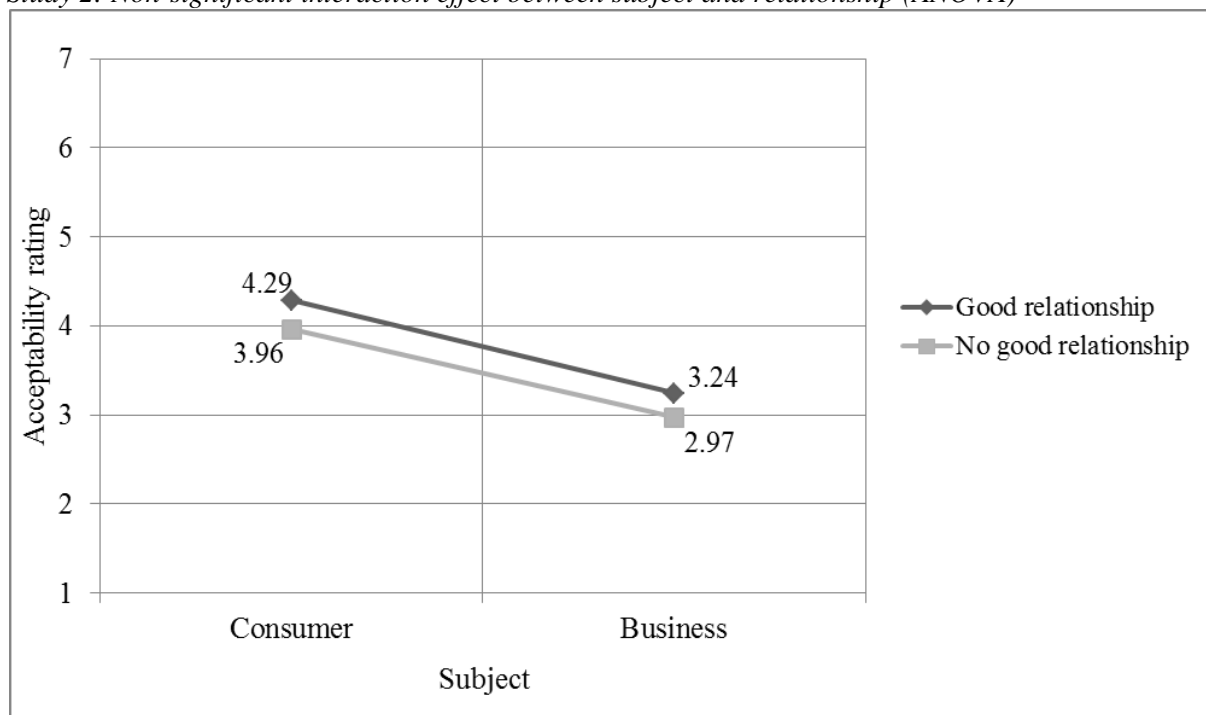
To test the three hypotheses with regard to ‘relationship’ as an underlying factor of double standards (i.e., Hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 2c), we conducted an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with subject (consumer versus business) and relationship (not good versus good) as the between-subjects independent variables and the mean acceptability score as the dependent variable.

A significant main effect of subject,  $F(1,260) = 106.72$ ,  $p < .001$ , shows that overall, participants evaluate consumers ( $M = 4.12$ ;  $SD = .78$ ) less harshly compared to businesses ( $M = 3.10$ ;  $SD = .84$ ). This result shows evidence for individuals’ use of double standards.

Further, a main effect of relationship,  $F(1,260) = 9.43$ ,  $p < .01$ , indicates that in general, respondents are less intolerant of questionable practices when these practices are performed by subjects with which they show a good relationship ( $M = 3.77$ ;  $SD = .91$ ) compared to subjects with which they show a not so good relationship ( $M = 3.46$ ;  $SD = .98$ ). Consequently, Hypothesis 2a is supported.

Finally, results show no significant interaction effect between subject and relationship,  $F(1,260) = .06$ ,  $p > .05$ . Figure 2 clearly indicates this non-significant interaction. This figure, however, shows that in case of judging consumers, respondents perceive unethical practices as more unacceptable when these practices are done by a consumer with which they have a not so good relationship ( $M = 3.96$ ;  $SD = .73$ ) than when these practices are done by one's best friend ( $M = 4.29$ ;  $SD = .80$ ),  $F(1,260) = 5.27$ ,  $p < .05$ . These results show evidence for Hypothesis 2b. In case of judging business companies, participants are more critical of unethical actions when these actions are done by business companies with which they show a not so good relationship ( $M = 2.97$ ;  $SD = .94$ ) compared to business companies with which they show a good relationship ( $M = 3.24$ ;  $SD = .70$ ),  $F(1,260) = 4.17$ ,  $p < .05$ . These findings confirm Hypothesis 2c.

Figure 2  
Study 2: Non-significant interaction effect between subject and relationship (ANOVA)



In sum, findings of the second study indicate that the use of double standards is not necessarily due to the fact that one party is a consumer while the other is a business. More specifically, participants were not only more unfavorably toward unethical business (versus consumer) behavior, they were also more unfavorably toward unethical behavior by consumers (versus one's best friend) and business companies with which they have a not so good (versus a good) relationship. These results indicate that double standards are rather due to differences in one's relationship with subjects engaging in immoral behavior. This 'relationship' factor, for which the second study shows evidence, implies that the use of double standards is not strictly reserved to consumer-business relations, but might be used in business-business and consumer-consumer relations as well.

## **6. Discussion**

A growing number of studies deal with the (un)acceptability of business practices (i.e., business ethics) and, to a lesser extent, the (un)acceptability of consumer practices (i.e., consumer ethics). However, empirical research which compares business ethics with consumer ethics remains scarce, although often quoted as an important line of research (e.g., Rallapalli, Vitell, Wiebe, & Barnes, 1994; Rawwas, Vitell, & Al-Khatib, 1994; Vitell, Lumpkin, & Rawwas, 1991; Vitell & Muncy, 1992). Next to demonstrating the existence of double standards (i.e., business misbehavior being judged more harshly than similar consumer misbehavior) and thereby confirming previous studies (e.g., DePaulo, 1985, 1987; Vermeir & Van Kenhove, 2008; see *Chapter 4*), this research deepens our understanding about this phenomenon by exploring two underlying factors (i.e., wealth and relationship). As these factors determine double standards, this implies that double standards go beyond business-consumer relations as they are also used in case of business-business and consumer-consumer relations.

First of all, we investigated 'wealth' as a possible underlying factor of double standards. Study 1 demonstrates that participants were not only harsher for unethical behavior by business companies (compared to consumers), but also for unethical behavior by prosperous consumers (compared to non-prosperous consumers) and prosperous business companies (compared to non-prosperous business

companies). More generally stated, people are more tolerant of unethical behavior when performed by financially less capable subjects compared to financially more capable subjects. In other words, the perceived difference in wealth between subjects may lead to different moral judgments of unethical behavior enacted by these subjects.

Research shows that individuals are more likely to behave dishonestly when they are confronted with a wealthier counterpart (Mazar & Ariely, 2006). For instance, a study by Hayes (1996) demonstrates that college students tolerate shoplifting more when it takes place in a large store compared to a small store. Another example is a recent study by Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy (2010). They examined the drivers of opportunistic customer claiming during service recovery (i.e., customers engaging in an opportunity to financially benefit of a company's service failure and recovery efforts; Berry & Seiders, 2008) and found that consumers were more likely to be opportunistic when dealing with large compared to small firms. In both examples, consumers might reason that large stores are less harmed by questionable consumer practices compared to small stores as they are financially more secure.

Our study extends the findings above by not only showing that people act more unethically toward wealthy (versus less wealthy) companies, but that they also are less tolerant of unethical behavior enacted by these wealthy (versus less wealthy) companies. In other words, individuals tolerate unethical business behavior more when it is performed by financially less capable companies compared to financially more capable companies. Taken together, businesses should be aware of the fact that good financial performances might backfire in times in which they engage in morally questionable behavior as individuals become more morally critical.

Second, next to 'wealth', we examined 'relationship' as a possible underlying factor of double standards. Study 2 indicates that respondents were not only less tolerant of unethical behavior by business companies (compared to consumers), but also of unethical behavior by consumers (versus one's best friend) and business companies with which they have a not so good relationship (versus business companies with which they have a good relationship). More generally, people are less tolerant of unethical behavior when performed by subjects with which they have a not so good relationship (versus subjects with which they have a good relationship). In other words, the difference

in relationship with subjects may lead to different moral judgments of unethical behavior enacted by these subjects.

Much literature is devoted to and shows evidence for the positive consequences retailers and businesses more generally experience due to committed customers. For instance, recent research shows that loyal customers are more likely to adopt loyalty cards (faster) compared to less loyal customers (Demoulin & Zidda, 2009). The positive influence of businesses being able to rely on committed and satisfied consumers has been demonstrated for many other variables, such as brand equity (e.g., Torres & Tribo, 2011), customer retention (e.g., Verhoef, 2003), and stock returns (e.g., Aksoy, Cooil, Groening, Keiningham, & Yalçin, 2008).

In the marketing ethics domain, previous research indicates that consumers being highly committed to a company behave more ethically toward that company compared to low committed consumers (Steenhaut & Van Kenhove, 2005). Our findings contribute to and extend this particular finding, and research on customer loyalty more generally, by showing that consumers tolerate unethical behavior of companies more when they have a good relationship with these companies compared to a not so good relationship. In other words, these results indicate that similar questionable business practices might be judged differently based on the relationship one has with these businesses. Translated into a practical implication, these results point to the importance for businesses to keep investing time and energy in developing high relationship commitment with stakeholders as these good relationships lead stakeholders to be less morally condemning of their questionable practices. Of course, high relationship commitment cannot be interpreted as a safeguard for excessive levels of unethical business behavior.

Previous research showed evidence for people's use of double standards. That is, unethical business actions are rated systematically less admissible compared to similar consumer actions (DePaulo, 1985, 1987; Vermeir & Van Kenhove, 2008). All these previous studies have in common that they study double standards in the realm of *consumers versus businesses*. They do not question whether the use of double standards is restricted to these consumer-business relations as they do not investigate possible underlying factors which might imply the occurrence of double standards in other relations too. Yet, this issue was already raised by DePaulo in 1987. He wondered to what extent the

double standard might necessarily be due to the consumer-business ‘opposition’. More specifically, he pointed to wealth as a possible underlying factor: “Perhaps the critical variable is actually the perceived wealth or vulnerability of the negotiating party” (p. 103). DePaulo (1987) also implicitly raises relationship as a possible underlying factor of double standards. The present study gives a decisive answer about these issues. Future research about double standards should take into account that double standards are not inherently tied to business-consumers relations, but might be used in business-business as well as consumer-consumer relations as well.

### ***6.1. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research***

This study has some limitations which may give direction to future research. A first restriction of our study might be the situation specificity of our results. Based on the Consumer Ethics Scale (Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992, 2005), we created different ethical scenarios as ethical judgments are situation-specific (Barnett & Karson, 1987). Future research might include more and other situations in trying to confirm and generalize the results of this study.

In the present chapter, the scenario for the ‘passively benefiting at the expense of others’ dimension of the Consumer Ethics Scale (Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992) was operationalized as the practice in which a company needs to repay 40 euros on the bank account of a subject, but, by inattention, pays 60 euros, which the subject notices but doesn’t say and keeps the extra 20 euros. For further research, it should be a better idea to keep this scenario more ‘neutral’ (i.e., repaying too much money instead of a certain amount of money) as 20 euros extra possibly means something completely else for a consumer compared to a business company.

Previous research demonstrates several positive consequences businesses might experience when having good financial grades. For instance, a recent study by Stanaland, Lwin, and Murphy (2011) shows that high perceived financial performance positively influences perceived corporate social responsibility which in turn positively impacts perceptions of corporate reputation, consumer trust, and loyalty. Based on such findings, one might expect that consumers are more morally lenient toward companies with good financial figures or companies that are financially wealthy. This

expectation is, however, opposite to the findings described in this chapter. It might be valuable for further research to examine this particular contradiction in more depth.

To tackle this issue, it would certainly be an advantage for further studies to manipulate ‘wealth’ in more strict ways. Do respondents only take into account wealth when reading about immoral behavior enacted by financially capable versus financially less capable companies? Or do respondents, based on the financial information about a company, infer this company’s size or efficient organisation and, consequently, also take such factors into account when making these moral judgments? If this would be the case, what about possible interaction effects between for instance company size and company wealth? Perhaps, consumers are especially critical of immoral behavior enacted by big *and* rich companies, and not so much of immoral behavior enacted by big *and* poor companies or small *and* rich companies.

In a similar vein, further studies would benefit from defining the ‘relationship’ factor more rigorously. In this chapter, the corporate scenarios described a company with which one has a good relationship versus no good relationship. The consumer scenarios, however, described a consumer versus one’s best friend. In other words, in case of the corporate scenarios, relationship was operationalized in terms of a good relationship versus no good relationship, while in the consumer scenarios, relationship was operationalized in terms of no relationship versus a good relationship. This inconsistency needs to be tackled in future research. Further, it needs to be investigated how respondents interpreted the particular description of the subjects. For instance, did they perceived this description in terms of relationship quality, relationship strength, or rather in terms of subject similarity or the ability to identify?

This study indicates that people judge unethical consumer behavior as more acceptable than similar business misbehavior. The question can be raised whether this difference in judgment is present for all people and in every situation. It may be worthwhile to examine to which extent the findings of this study apply to all individuals. A personality variable that may be of importance in this context is one’s ethical ideology. According to Forsyth (1980, 1992), moral philosophies or ethical ideologies can be classified into idealism and relativism. While idealistic individuals adhere to moral absolutes when making ethical judgments, relativistic individuals feel that what is moral depends on



the nature of the situation, the prevailing culture and the individuals involved (Forsyth, 1980, 1992). Based on these definitions, we might expect that idealists will not judge the same unethical behavior differently depending on the subject of this behavior. Relativists, on the other hand, are expected to be prone to the use of double standards as their judgments of unethical practices depend on the subject performing these practices.

Further, previously we noted that companies need to be aware of the fact that good financial figures may backfire as they might lead individuals to have a more critical view on companies' deceptive practices. However, good financial figures might also benefit companies in terms of, for instance, trust and investor's interest. Consequently, one might wonder whether these advantages outweigh the possible disadvantages of good financial figures (e.g., individuals' judging questionable practices more harshly). In other words, taken all the advantages and disadvantages together, does a good financial performance really 'backfires' in the end?

## **Note**

<sup>1</sup> In the present chapter, whenever the word ‘subject’ is mentioned, this can point to both a consumer and a business company.

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## 8. Appendices

### 8.1. Appendix A: Scenarios – Dutch (Study 1 and Study 2)

*Scenario 1: Actively benefiting from illegal activities.*

Een [subject]\* brengt een product terug naar de leverancier omdat het beschadigd is. De beschadiging is echter de fout van het [subject]\* zelf en niet van de leverancier.

*Scenario 2: Passively benefiting at the expense of others.*

Een bedrijf dient 40 euro terug te storten op de rekening van een [subject]\*. Door onoplettendheid stort het bedrijf echter 60 euro. Het [subject]\* merkt dit, maar zegt dit niet en houdt de extra 20 euro.

*Scenario 3: Actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices.*

Een [subject]\* vertelt niet de volledige waarheid bij het onderhandelen met een autohandelaar over de prijs voor een nieuw voertuig.

*Scenario 4: No harm/no foul.*

Een [subject]\* onderhandelt gedurende enkele weken met een architectenbureau over de plannen voor een nieuwe huisvesting, hoewel het [subject]\* nog niet helemaal zeker is wat betreft de samenwerking met het bureau en het bouwplan misschien links zal laten liggen.

*Scenario 5: Downloading copyrighted materials/buying counterfeit goods.*

Een [subject]\* heeft op één van zijn/haar computers (auteursrechtelijk beschermde) software gedownload zonder hiervoor te betalen.

\* Dit subject was ‘een consument’, ‘je beste vriendin’, ‘een bedrijf waar je geen goede band mee hebt’, ‘een bedrijf waar je een zeer goede band mee hebt’, ‘een consument die het financieel niet breed

heeft', 'een consument die het financieel zeer goed heeft', 'een bedrijf dat het financieel niet breed heeft', of 'een bedrijf dat het financieel zeer goed heeft'.



## **8.2. Appendix B: Scenarios – English (Study 1 and Study 2)**

*Scenario 1: Actively benefiting from illegal activities.*

A [subject]\* returns a product to the supplier because it's damaged. However, the damage was the fault of the [subject]\* and not of the supplier.

*Scenario 2: Passively benefiting at the expense of others.*

A company needs to repay 40 euros on the bank account of a [subject]\*. However, by inattention, the company pays 60 euros. The [subject]\* notices this, but doesn't say anything and keeps the extra 20 euros.

*Scenario 3: Actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices.*

A [subject]\* doesn't tell the whole truth when negotiating with a car dealer about the price of a new vehicle.

*Scenario 4: No harm/no foul.*

During some weeks, a [subject]\* negotiates with an architect's firm about the plans for a new accommodation, although the [subject]\* is not yet completely sure about the cooperation with the firm and, maybe, will shrug off the building plan.

*Scenario 5: Downloading copyrighted materials/buying counterfeit goods.*

A [subject]\* downloaded (copyrighted) software on one of his/her/its computers without paying for it.

\* This subject was a consumer, one's best friend, a company with which one has a not so good relationship, a company with which one has a good relationship, a non-prosperous consumer, a prosperous consumer, a non-prosperous company, or a prosperous company.



## **Chapter 6: Summary and Discussion**

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## Chapter 6:

### Summary and Discussion

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As demonstrated by specific examples in the introductory chapter, misbehavior among consumers is the rule rather than the exception, which can result in detrimental effects for business, consumers, and society in general (Fullerton & Punj, 2004). Yet in the marketing ethics field, most attention focuses on the (un)acceptability of business practices (i.e., business ethics), whereas research into the (un)acceptability of consumer practices (i.e., consumer ethics) is far less prevalent (Fukukawa, 2003; Neale & Fullerton, 2010). By examining ethical issues related to three specific consumer topics, the studies in this dissertation try to fill a gap in marketing ethics literature and generate more insight into the consumer ethics domain. First, I investigate the impact of personality on consumer ethical beliefs (*Chapter 2*). Second, I focus on the important influence of intuitive feelings on people's moral judgments (*Chapter 3*). Third, I examine the moral hypocrisy phenomenon in more depth (*Chapters 4–5*).

In this chapter (structured according to the three topics), I recapitulate the main findings of the studies reported in the four previous chapters, while also outlining their implications, contributions, limitations, and directions for further research. After this elaboration, I conclude with some general remarks and ideas for ongoing research, which encompass all three topics and reflect the consumer ethics domain in general.

#### 1. The Role of Personality in Consumer Ethical Beliefs

The overall importance of personality in the consumer ethics field has received support (e.g., Hunt & Vitell, 1986, 1993). However, the roles of more *specific* personality variables are less certain (Vitell, 2003; Vitell, Singhapakdi, & Thomas, 2001), leading researchers to call for more studies that investigate the range of antecedents of consumer misbehavior (e.g., Al-Rafee & Cronan, 2006; Fullerton & Punj, 2004; Vitell, 2003). **Chapter 2** complies with this call by investigating the impact of self-regulatory focus on consumer ethical beliefs or consumers' judgments of unethical consumer

practices. Self-regulatory focus is highly influential and relevant for a wide variety of consumer behaviors (Joireman & Kuhlman, 2004; Roth, 2003). Yet, less attention has been directed to the role of the regulatory focus framework in marketing (e.g., Aaker & Lee, 2001; Andrade, 2005; Cohen & Andrade, 2004; Kidwell, Hardesty, & Childers, 2008), and no previous study has linked it to consumer ethical beliefs.

Findings of Study 1, which uses a student sample, and Study 2, which uses a sample drawn from a more general population, show that self-regulatory focus significantly influences consumer ethical beliefs. In particular, promotion affects attitudes toward questionable consumer practices; people with a stronger (versus weaker) promotion focus are less likely to believe that these practices are unacceptable. Prevention also influences perceptions of questionable consumer practices, such that people with a stronger (versus weaker) prevention focus are more inclined to evaluate these practices as unacceptable.

Studying consumer ethics is beneficial, in that it generates a better understanding of why consumers slip into unethical behavior (Vitell & Paolillo, 2003) and thus might help reduce such types of misbehavior (Vitell, 2003). The knowledge that self-regulatory focus relates to consumer ethics could help businesses mitigate the damages due to such misbehavior. Suppose, for example, that the music industry wants to minimize illegal music downloading. Recognizing that self-regulatory focus, as well as representing an individual difference variable, might be situationally induced, the music industry could create a context in which the prevention focus dominates (e.g., focusing on oughts, obligations, duties, responsibilities). To ensure the value of this approach, it would be helpful if future research examined consumer ethical beliefs or behavior after a temporal inducement of motivation states, rather than measuring people's promotion and prevention focus with self-reported measurement scales.

Such established scales to measure self-regulatory focus (e.g., Carver & White, 1994; Higgins et al., 2001; Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002) are limited by the extent to which people have insight into themselves (Summerville & Roese, 2008). Further research therefore might rerun my study but substitute tests that can distinguish well between promotion and prevention foci for the self-reported measurement scales (e.g., choice test; Wang & Lee, 2006). With these tests, respondents do not need

good knowledge about their own self-regulatory focus, nor are they aware of the real purpose of the measure. *Chapter 2* measures consumer ethical beliefs with the Consumer Ethics Scale (Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992, 2005), which has been used extensively, proven valid, and updated in 2005 (Vitell & Muncy, 2005). But it would be worthwhile to revise and update this questionnaire to include, among other things, more salient consumer issues such as self-service supermarket checkouts and online music and video file sharing (Neale & Fullerton, 2010).

*Chapter 2* also indicates that self-regulatory focus explains only limited variance in consumer ethical beliefs. Although this is not exceptional, it would be helpful to explain the interrelationship more completely by clarifying its underlying process(es). Further, to gain a fuller understanding of consumer ethics, a host of other specific personality variables that might influence consumer ethical beliefs should be scrutinized (Vitell, 2003; Kavak, Gürel, Eryigit, & Tektas, 2009). Beyond personality variables, the characteristics of the situation also affect people's likelihood to behave unethically (Wiltermuth, 2011). Although consumer ethics research has generated fruitful results in the past, more research should address the role of situational factors and their influence on consumer ethics (Vitell, 2003).

Finally, unethical behavior depends not only on personality and situational variables but also on their *interactions* (e.g., Ford & Richardson, 1994). Research in the moral domain would benefit from examining the antecedents of dysfunctional consumer behavior (i.e., personality and situational variables) more holistically (Harris & Reynolds, 2003); a more systematic exploration of the interaction of personal and situational variables in the moral domain is warranted (Walker & Frimer, 2007). After a version of *Chapter 2* was published in *Journal of Business Ethics*, Gino and Margolis (2011) investigated how regulatory focus influences unethical behavior, noting that it would be worthwhile to examine the boundary conditions of the effects they observed. For example, they assume that if lying or cheating serves a goal of security, people with a prevention focus might be more likely to behave unethically than those with a dominant promotion focus. This research direction is a good example of a way to apply a personality  $\times$  situational approach to study consumer ethics.

## 2. The Role of Intuitive Feelings in Moral Decision Making

The omnipresent and far-ranging consequences of moral judgment (Hofmann & Baumeister, 2010) make it very important to gain comprehensive insights into various aspects that might influence these judgments. Traditionally, moral judgments have been considered outcomes of rational and deliberate reasoning processes (e.g., Kohlberg, 1976; Rest, 1986). More recently, researchers provide evidence of and call for more research about the role of moral intuition (e.g., Haidt, 2001). **Chapter 3** adds to this research stream by investigating the impact of affective priming and conceptual fluency on moral decision making. The three studies that constitute this chapter examine if and how the valence of color cues affect evaluations of positively and negatively valenced behaviors. Therefore, these studies add to the emerging stream of research on color functioning too (e.g., Deng, Hui, & Hutchinson, 2010; Lindsey et al., 2010).

Studies 1 and 2 use colors with definite valence differences (i.e., red versus green); Study 3 uses neutral colors, endowed with negative versus positive versus neutral valences through an evaluative conditioning paradigm. In all three studies, respondents regard undesirable behaviors as less unacceptable when described on negatively valenced (versus positively valenced) background colors. Desirable consumer behaviors appear more acceptable when described on positively valenced (versus negatively valenced) background colors. In other words, a match between the valence of the judgmental (un)desirable behavior and the valence of its background color renders processing conceptually fluent, which ultimately translates into a more positive/less negative evaluation of the judgmental behavior. By adding a neutral control condition, Study 3 shows that the obtained effects are due to processing fluency in case of valence matches and not to disfluency in case of valence mismatches.

From a practical point of view, these findings are useful for those who want to improve individual morality. The findings particularly warn against relying on common intuition: One might expect that messages using negative color cues increase the undesirability of negative behaviors, but the findings of *Chapter 3* show that such messages render these behaviors even more acceptable/less unacceptable. Both prevention and promotion campaigns should avoid the use of negatively valenced



colors, like red. Our findings are thus counterintuitive, in that red has produced positive consequences in various situations (e.g., Braun & Silver, 1995; Chan & Ng, 2009; Kwallek & Lewis, 1990; Stone, 2003). However, *Chapter 3* demonstrates that red easily can backfire and prompt negative consequences. Noting that a match of the valence of message elements may backfire in a persuasive context, my results also fly in the face of research documenting so-called match or fit effects (e.g., Adams, Fasseur, & Geuens, 2011; Zhao & Pechmann, 2007).

Additional research might examine the extent to which the findings in *Chapter 3* generalize to other cues (e.g., symbols, pictures, mood state) and situations (e.g., consumption experiences, real behavior). For example, in some countries and cultures, red evokes positive perceptions (e.g., China), and green might be perceived as negative (e.g., in Latin American countries, green might evoke the jungle and thus danger). It would be interesting to investigate whether opposite effects arise in countries in which red and green are perceived in ways opposite to the scenarios in my study. Further research might also examine how to counter the effects or take a closer look at possible boundary conditions.

I argue that conceptual fluency underlies the effects in all three studies. However, *Chapter 3* does not show whether people experience fluency and/or a positive affective state, because the experimental design did not include any such measures. Next to investigating alternative explanations, further research should test this underlying process, such as by using moderation mechanisms. For example, if processing speed is the primary reason, then manipulating cognitive load should mitigate this effect. Other methods that could provide evidence of the underlying process are self-reported measures of ease of processing or response time during judgment. Alternatively, a separate test might measure response times to related words presented against a certain background color that matches or mismatches the valence of these words.

More generally, a rational approach in the moral domain is limited to the role of rational thought; other decision-making processes such as intuition and emotions are excluded (Reynolds & Ceranic, 2009). Nevertheless, research has shown that emotions can overcome rational thoughts (Vohs, Baumeister, & Loewenstein, 2007) and drive unethical decisions (Schweitzer, & Gibson, 2008). Although research dealing with intuitive feelings in the moral domain is certainly growing,

more studies are needed. For example, few studies consider the impact of meta-cognitive experiences on moral judgment (Laham, Alter, & Goodwin, 2009). Furthermore, researchers might question the extent to which moral judgments represent rational thinking processes versus intuitive feelings.

Another, more general limitation of the rational approach is its failure to account adequately for the role of contextual biases. Even as research dealing with these contextual biases in the moral domain increases (e.g., Gino, Moore, & Bazerman, 2009; Gino, Shu, & Bazerman, 2010), more studies are needed. Research should continue to explore contextual biases to identify conditions in which such factors operate and to develop strategies to counter the influence of contextual biases, which ultimately might result in less ethical or more unethical choices (Boyle, Dahlstrom, & Kellaris, 1998).

### **3. Moral Hypocrisy**

*Chapters 2 and 3* refer to the unacceptability versus acceptability of consumer practices (i.e., consumer ethics). Business ethics instead involves the unacceptability versus acceptability of business practices. To date, research dealing with the comparison of business ethics and consumer ethics remains scarce, though such a comparison is often cited as an important line of research (e.g., Rallapalli, Vitell, Wiebe, & Barnes, 1994; Rawwas, Vitell, & Al-Khatib, 1994; Vitell, Lumpkin, & Rawwas, 1991; Vitell and Muncy, 1992). Previous research examining this particular comparison indicates a so-called double standard: Business misbehavior is judged more harshly than similar consumer behavior (e.g., DePaulo, 1985, 1987; Vermeir and Van Kenhove, 2008). The findings in *Chapters 4 and 5* confirm this finding, as well as add to the limited knowledge about possible underlying factors.

**Chapter 4** investigates specifically whether the neutralization techniques provide a meaningful way to approach double standards. In addition to the positive relationship between the extent to which people explain away consumer/business misbehavior and their acceptability judgments of this misbehavior, these findings show that individuals who justify questionable consumer actions to a certain degree condone the same actions by businesses to a much lesser extent, which ultimately

leads to a difference in their acceptability judgments (i.e., double standard). Consequently, neutralization techniques involve a process to explain the double standard phenomenon. A strategy emanating from the neutralization concept might counter the use of double standards. Specifically, people's abilities to construct neutralization thoughts in case of consumer misbehavior could be impeded (cf. Bersoff, 1999).

*Chapter 4* also contributes to the limited knowledge about the neutralization concept, which likely has significant explanatory power for the study of consumer ethics (Vitell, 2003; Vitell and Muncy, 1992). Little research exists about this topic, despite its potential to explain why "ordinary people" sometimes slip into unethical behavior. The likelihood of acting unethically increases with the likelihood of finding reasons to justify these actions (Pillutla & Thau, 2009), so neutralization techniques deserve more in-depth investigation (Vitell, 2003). Further research should examine the role of personality and situational factors, as well as their interactions, in connection with people's propensity to neutralize (Aquino & Becker, 2005; Chatzidakis, Hibbert, & Smith, 2007; Detert, Trevino, & Sweitzer, 2008; Shu, Gino, & Bazerman, 2011; Steenhaut & Van Kenhove, 2006). Gaining a fuller understanding of the cognitions that make unethical behavior easier, as well as the characteristics that increase the likelihood of these cognitions, should provide practical insights for those seeking to reduce unethical decision making and behavior (Chatzidakis et al., 2007; Detert et al., 2008; Kieffer & Sloan, 2009).

For example, previous research shows that techniques of neutralization are more likely to appear in questionable disposition situations compared to questionable acquisition situations (Strutton, Vitell, & Pelton, 1994). This finding is supported by the guilt mechanism. Strutton et al. (1994) more particularly note that less guilt might be anticipated on in disposition (versus acquisition) situations, so it is easier for people to apply neutralization techniques. However, the opposite argument also makes sense: People might be more likely to neutralize when they need to alleviate a high level of anticipated guilt. It would be interesting for research to tackle this particular issue.

In addition to examining personality and situational variables related to neutralization techniques, it would be worthwhile to investigate how people perceive others who use such techniques. Denial of injury, denial of victim, and condemning the condemners techniques all rely on a

sense of the seller's fault, placing the blame on the seller. Other techniques, such as an appeal to higher loyalties and denial of responsibility, refer to uncontrollable circumstances as they place the blame on extraneous events (cf. Rosenbaum & Kuntze, 2003; Steenhaut, 2006). Do people's judgments of others' questionable behavior vary when those others use mainly seller's fault versus uncontrollable circumstances techniques? A difference in judgment could arise because techniques that blame the seller could be used repeatedly, whereas blaming uncontrollable circumstances seems less frequently available and even might be used only once, for one specific situation.

Other persons can explain away their undesirable behaviors to different degrees too. A person who engages in high levels of neutralization might give the impression that he or she feels guilty; alternatively, this high level of neutralization could imply that the person already has participated many times in this misbehavior and thus has had many opportunities to create neutralization skills. Furthermore, judgments of a neutralizing person might vary depending on whether he or she belongs to an in-group versus out-group: An in-group member might receive the benefit of the doubt, such that high neutralization levels suggest a high level of guilt. However, the high neutralization level of an out-group member might rather be perceived as the result of the development of a skill.

*Chapter 4*, as well as other studies (e.g., DePaulo, 1985, 1987; Vermeir & Van Kenhove, 2008), investigates double standards without questioning whether their use is due to the presence of a business versus a consumer. The aim of **Chapter 5** was to examine two possible underlying factors of double standards, with the prediction that they might not be reserved to consumer–business relations but also might appear in business–business and consumer–consumer relations. With regard to the underlying wealth factor, participants not only judge unethical business behavior more harshly than similar consumer behavior, but they also exhibit harsher judgments of misbehavior by prosperous consumers than non-prosperous consumers and of misbehavior by prosperous than non-prosperous businesses. In other words, the perceived difference in wealth between subjects can lead to different moral judgments of unethical behavior enacted by these subjects. Earnings have benefits for a company, but companies must also realize that strong financial figures may backfire as they allow consumers to adopt a more critical view of their deceptive practices.

With regard to the relationship factor, participants are not only less tolerant of business misbehavior compared with similar consumer misbehavior, but they are also less tolerant of unethical behavior by consumers compared with similar behavior by a best friend, or of unethical behavior by businesses with which they have a not so good (versus a good) relationship. In other words, the difference in the relationships with subjects leads to different moral judgments of unethical behavior enacted by these subjects. Consumers who are highly committed to a company behave more ethically toward it than do less committed consumers (Steenhaut & Van Kenhove, 2005). Our findings contribute further to this finding; highly committed consumers also are more tolerant of the company's unethical behaviors than are less committed consumers. These results highlight the need for businesses to invest time and energy in developing high relationship commitment with stakeholders, because these strong relationships make stakeholders less morally condemning. However, businesses might interpret high relationship commitment not as a means to behave excessively immoral.

Future research might comply with the recent calls for more research into conditions that temper the moral hypocrisy phenomenon (Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2008). Is the difference in people's judgment of their own versus others' unethical behavior consistent across all people and in every situation? Future research might investigate the role of personality and situational variables in relationship with moral hypocrisy in more depth. For instance, one might assume that idealists (i.e., people who adhere to moral absolutes when making ethical judgments; Forsyth, 1980, 1992) do not judge the same unethical behavior differently across varied adopters of this behavior, whereas relativists (i.e., people who believe that what is moral depends on the nature of the situation, the prevailing culture, and the people involved; Forsyth, 1980, 1992) instead may be prone to moral hypocrisy as their judgments of unethical practices depend on who enacts these practices. Another variable that might be worth investigating is the outcome bias (i.e., people's tendency to judge the quality of decisions and the competence of decision makers on the basis of the outcomes of their decisions; Baron & Hershey, 1988). One could expect that moral hypocrisy does not arise in situations in which misbehavior results in positive (versus negative) consequences.

Finally, it might be worthwhile for further studies to perceive the moral hypocrisy phenomenon in light of the self-serving bias and, more generally, the attribution theory. This latter

motivational theory is concerned with how people give meaning to a certain event or, in other words, how they attribute causes to the events around them. People are likely to internally (i.e., attribute to personality factors) attribute others' failures while own failures are externally (i.e., attributed to situational factors) attributed. Others' successes, on the other hand, are likely to be attributed to external circumstances while people are prone to attribute own successes internally. Such attributions are self-serving as people avoid any personal recrimination. At first sight, there seem to be points of similarity between such self-serving biases and the moral hypocrisy phenomenon. Consequently, it might be valuable for further studies to investigate this particular issue in more depth. One might question, for instance, whether similar mechanisms are underlying these apparently related phenomena.

#### **4. General Remarks and Ideas for Research**

By studying consumer ethics, this dissertation has aimed to contribute to the marketing ethics field, moving beyond the main focus of attention on the business side, compared with the consumer's side. A recent conference asked whether the consumer has been forgotten in the business ethics domain (Tagung: Die Rolle des Konsumenten in der Wirtschaftsethik, KWI, Essen, November 29, 2011). I find that specialized ethics and marketing/business ethics journals (e.g., *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Business Ethics Quarterly*) clearly focus more on the business side. As Vitell (2003) has noted, "a large body of literature has developed concerning ethics in the marketplace; however, much of this research has focused primarily on the seller side of the buyer/seller dyad" (p. 33).

However, the growing amount of research dealing with morality, especially in the psychology domain, seems to be counterbalancing this marketing ethics literature gap. Although the moral issues tackled in psychological studies are somewhat different in nature, they provide insight into why ordinary consumers behave in undesirable ways. De Cremer (2009) postulates that "the application of psychological insights will be necessary to promote our understanding of why it is the case that good people sometimes can do bad things as well" (p. 4). Unfortunately, in some cases different domains study similar matters, without considering each other's evidence or even knowing that other domains

exist that study similar topics. This description applies, for instance, to marketing ethics studies dealing with double standards and psychological research dealing with moral hypocrisy. To gain more insight into the phenomenon of unethical consumer behavior, we cannot take root in our own singular literature field but rather must be receptive to cross-fertilization and “immerse ourselves in the varied perspectives and positions that exist” (Reynolds & Harris, 2009, p. 330).

Even if we were to take cross-fertilization for granted, I argue that we need to question the validity of existing knowledge about consumer ethics due to the possible influence of social desirability biases. A recent study by Dalton and Ortegren (2011) shows evidence for raising this remark. Previous studies demonstrate that women are more ethical than men (e.g., Ang, Cheng, Lim, & Tambyah, 2001; Rawwas, 1996) but also that women are more likely to respond in a socially desirable way compared to men (Bernardi & Guptill, 2008; Chung & Monroe, 2003). Dalton and Ortegren (2011) thus postulate that we cannot discern whether gender differences in the ethics domain are due to women’s greater ethicality or their greater proneness to social desirability compared with men. Their results suggest that the effect of gender in the ethics domain is largely attenuated when social desirability is taken into account.

The social desirability issue might be pertinent for, for instance, research on moral hypocrisy. In addition to influencing the validity of the research findings, a social desirability bias might push individuals to profess that they are more ethical than they actually are. This bias stems from people’s propensity to rate themselves above average on several positive characteristics (Dalton & Ortegren, 2011). In self-reported questionnaires, people likely perceive themselves as more ethical than they really are. A question for future research is whether consumers still exhibit moral hypocrisy when controlling for social desirability.

More generally, any interpretation of results in an ethics domain should recognize the possibility of social desirability bias. In turn, it would be valuable for research to provide more insight into the relationship between social desirability and consumer ethics. For example, it might be interesting to delineate the conditions in which impression management and self-deception are more likely to affect ethical responses (Dalton & Ortegren, 2011).

In line with many studies in the consumer ethics domain, the dependent variables of the research included in this dissertation refer to individuals' ethical beliefs or moral judgments. For example, my study about self-regulatory focus (i.e., *Chapter 2*) uses the Consumer Ethics Scale (Muncy & Vitell, 1992; Vitell & Muncy, 1992, 2005), which measures respondents' *beliefs* about questionable consumer practices. Although this scale has been validated and applied many times in previous consumer ethics studies, measuring beliefs is inherently limited, in that inferences are based on what people say about their beliefs, rather than what they do. In the other studies in this dissertation, my coauthors and I used ethical beliefs as a proxy for behavior, with the theory that these beliefs influence intentions to engage in questionable practices, which then influences behavior. Additional studies might include actual behavioral measures, which support more ecologically valid conclusions (DeAndrea, Carpenter, Shulman, & Levine, 2009). Paper-based or computer-generated contexts that ask consumers to indicate how they would behave cannot perfectly replicate the multiplicity of crucial determinant factors that are associated with any consumer misbehavior decision situation (Reynolds & Harris, 2009). Furthermore, measuring behavior partly solves the social desirability issue mentioned previously.

In this dissertation, ethics reflect a decision that takes place in one particular moment. However, little research addresses sequential ethical decision making. Similar to the approach I have taken, most previous studies concentrate on solitary ethical decisions, without consideration of one's moral history or future (Zhong, Ku, Lount, & Murnighan, 2010). Research on moral compensating and moral licensing, for instance, shows that previous (un)ethical deeds might influence one's (un)ethical behavior on a particular moment in time. For example, when people have engaged in good deeds, they might be confident about their morality level, which might become that high that morally questionable behavior in the present is allowed (Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010). It would be an interesting research endeavor to take a closer look at this "sequential picture" when studying consumer ethics.

Another way to grasp this 'broader view' could be to study ethics from a more social perspective. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1986), social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), and social information processing theory (Salanick & Pfeffer, 1978) all highlight how people look to their social environment for cues about appropriate ways to behave (Mayer, Kuenzi, & Greenbaum, 2009). Group



decision making, for example, is a common practice that enables otherwise ethical people to behave in deviant ways. When everyone is responsible, no one really feels responsible (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). A better understanding of consumer misbehavior might derive from studying it with a ‘sequential and social perspective’.

Another general remark concerns the focus in many ethics studies on the negative functions of consumers behaving badly. But the same negative behavior of consumers might also serve positive functions; for example, consumers behaving badly could contribute to other people’s personal sense of well-being. The sense that many citizens lie on their income taxes may help others who do not lie feel better about themselves (Fisk et al., 2010). Studying consumer misbehavior from this positive perspective might enrich the consumer ethics domain.

Ultimately, the consumer ethics domain is interested in the unacceptability versus acceptability of consumer practices. In this dissertation, I have focused on the negative side of the consumer ethics definition by studying consumer misbehavior. However, consumers also have another ethical responsibility, that is, to act in ethical or good ways—such as recycling, buying fair trade products, or taking animal welfare into account in buying decisions. These actions refer to the concept of consumer social responsibility. Further research should answer the question whether or not similar processes and perspectives can be used to study both the negative and positive side of consumer ethics.

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Centre for Retail Research: [www.retailresearch.org](http://www.retailresearch.org)

Tera Consultants: [www.teraconsultants.fr](http://www.teraconsultants.fr)



