

Research Article

Do less ethical consumers denigrate more ethical consumers? The effect of willful ignorance on judgments of others

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Abstract

This research shows that consumers who willfully ignore ethical product attributes denigrate other, more ethical consumers who seek out and use this information in making purchase decisions. Across three studies, willfully ignorant consumers negatively judge ethical others they have never met across various disparate personality traits (e.g., fashionable, boring). The denigration arises from the self-threat inherent in negative social comparison with others who acted ethically instead of choosing not to do so. In addition, this denigration has detrimental downstream consequences, undermining the denigrator's commitment to ethical values, as evidenced by reduced anger toward firms who violate the ethical principle in question and reduced intention to behave ethically in the future. There are two moderators of the effect: Denigration becomes less strong if willfully ignorant consumers have a second opportunity to act ethically after initially ignoring the ethical product information and also significantly weakens if initially ignoring the ethical attribute is seen as justifiable. These results have implications for understanding ethical consumption behavior, perceptions of ethical consumerism in general, and marketing of ethical products.

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The desire to act ethically is inherent in most consumers, but this desire is not always reflected in market behavior. For example, most of us value the idea of fair labor practices, but how many people actually attempt to ascertain the manufacturing origins of their clothing? Besides the time and energy it takes to pursue this information, there are potential psychological costs to obtaining it. Emotional attributes such as whether a product was made with child labor cause distress, and this distress can lead to a number of avoidance responses (e.g., Luce, 1998). When the relevant ethical information is not available to consumers, a prevalent avoidance response is for consumers to remain “willfully ignorant” of the information by requesting ethical attribute information “at a significantly lower

rate than they would have used the information had it been available” (Ehrich & Irwin, 2005, p. 266). In this research, we ask the question: What happens after consumers decide to ignore information about ethical product attributes by not requesting it? In particular, what happens when consumers forgo ethical product information while aware that there are other consumers who do collect and consider ethical product information before making their decisions? What is the response to those individuals who actively seek out ethical information, whom we term “ethical others,” and how does this response affect consumers' own future ethical behavior?

Prior research on the effect of observing others' acts of virtue suggests that people may experience “a built-in emotional responsiveness to moral beauty” (Haidt, 2003, p. 284) that leads to admiration of the ethical others as well as the desire to behave more ethically themselves in the future. It is possible that consumers could experience this positive shift in

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judgment, termed “elevation” (Haidt, 2003), when they know that others spent time collecting and considering ethical product information. Elevation is an optimistic phenomenon but may not be the only response to ethical others. We propose an opposing response, in which consumers denigrate others, which we define as negatively judging another individual’s personality, both by rating them more negatively on negatively valenced personality traits and less positively on positively valenced traits. After deciding to ignore ethical product information, a consumer might feel threatened by the negative contrast with the ethical others’ actions. Denigrating these ethical others may help counteract the feeling of threat arising from the negative social comparison (e.g., Fein & Spencer, 1997; Wills, 1981).

Across three studies, we demonstrate that consumers who ignore ethical attribute information denigrate other consumers who choose to seek out this ethical information. As such, this research makes several theoretical contributions. It is the first, to our knowledge, to examine the denigration phenomenon within the domain of everyday consumption. These findings also extend previous work by providing evidence that denigrating others in the ethical domain leads to detrimental downstream consequences for consumers’ own future ethical behavior and by demonstrating ways in which both the propensity to denigrate and the effects of denigration can be moderated. Note that the moral decision tested in these studies, the decision not to know about ethical attributes of products, is an omission rather than a commission (Spranca, Minsk, & Baron, 1991) and is both relatively mild and relatively common in the marketplace. Nevertheless, the results will show that this common omission can have significant effects on later judgments and behaviors. From a practical standpoint, our findings also provide insight into a potential reason why ethical products are rarely market leaders (Luchs, Naylor, Irwin, & Raghunathan, 2010). Once a consumer chooses to remain willfully ignorant once, a cycle begins that leads that consumer to be even less likely to be ethical in the future.

Theoretical background

Ethical market behaviors and willful ignorance

Past research suggests that consumers may not choose ethical products because the difficult/emotional aspects of ethical attributes can lead consumers to want to avoid thinking about them. Luce (1998) showed that the act of making an emotional tradeoff can cause decision makers to avoid the tradeoff altogether. The most common way to avoid marketplace tradeoffs involving ethics is probably to avoid knowing whether products are ethical or not. In a paper exploring this idea, Ehrich and Irwin (2005) showed that consumers avoid finding out about (i.e., remain willfully ignorant of) ethical attributes such as labor practices and environmental friendliness even though they will use the information to make their decision if it is readily available. However, the question that remains is what happens if a consumer’s willful ignorance is highlighted or challenged by others? Extant research has not yet

shown whether willful ignorance interacts with a consumer’s social environment to produce social consequences.

Prior literature suggests two potential consequences of learning that others have been more ethical than oneself. For certain types of ethical observations, people tend to elevate toward the ethical others in the future (e.g., Haidt, 2003). In other situations, people seem to feel threatened by ethical others and denigrate them as a response to this threat (e.g., Fein & Spencer, 1997). We argue that the second option (i.e., denigrating ethical others) is much more likely to occur in our context and explain why next.

Why willful ignorance leads to denigration of ethical others

Some previous research suggests that observing someone perform a moral act might lead to a positive emotional response, or a feeling of moral elevation (e.g., Haidt, 2003). Essentially, observing other individuals perform ethical acts might lead to admiration of these ethical others, motivating the consumer to perform similar acts in the future. However, we suspect that this literature is less relevant to the context of the present research, because in past research on elevation, participants view moral acts that are not directly related to an act that they failed to complete and thus simply serve as outside observers. Willfully ignorant consumers, on the other hand, are able to directly compare others’ ethical behavior to their own lack of the same behavior. Thus, we predict, based on social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Suls & Wheeler, 2000), that the contrast of ethical others’ actions to one’s own lack of such behavior should instead create a sense of self-threat among willfully ignorant consumers that leads them to denigrate instead of elevate.

Social comparison theory posits that individuals make direct comparisons with others in order to evaluate their personal characteristics, opinions, and abilities (Festinger, 1954). These comparisons can reveal information that is threatening to the self (e.g., Morse & Gergen, 1970; Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988), especially when the comparison is made to someone who is superior on relevant qualities (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997) and/or if the task being compared is relevant to the self (Tesser et al., 1988), as viewing ethical product information is to a willfully ignorant consumer. Because consumers are highly motivated to avoid viewing themselves negatively in comparison with others (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), they then turn to various self-protection strategies in order to prevent such negative feelings from arising and/or persisting. For example, self-enhancement or self-protection motives (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009) might lead to reactions such as self-deception and moral hypocrisy. Self-deception allows people to behave in a self-interested way while at the same time believing that their moral principles are still upheld (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004), and moral hypocrisy results in “morality [being] extolled—even enacted—not with an eye to producing a good and right outcome but in order to appear moral yet still benefit oneself” (Batson, Kobrynowicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, & Wilson, 1997, p. 1335).

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