

Moral Motives in Consumption

SHREYANS GOENKA, SANKAR SEN, AND MANOJ THOMAS

ABSTRACT The authors introduce the “Three Moral Motives Framework” to explain and predict consumers’ moral behaviors in the marketplace. The framework identifies three key motives—moral-beneficence, moral-self, and moral-duty—that shape when, how, and why consumers seek moral utility in their consumption choices. These motives may work together or in opposition, with varying sensitivities across individuals and contexts, influencing divergent moral decisions. The framework aims to reconcile conflicting findings in moral behavior literature and offers a unified approach to understanding consumer morality in the marketplace.

The marketplace, like most other domains of human endeavor and experience, is rife with moral issues. Marketers not only produce good or bad products, they also do so in right or wrong ways. For every company that harms, polluting the environment, treating its business partners, employees, and consumers poorly, practicing business unfairly, or even violating human rights, there are others that care, safeguarding the environment, treating their stakeholders with dignity, and going beyond legal imperatives to act as responsibly and ethically as possible. This raises an important—and persisting—question: When, how much, and why does morality matter to consumers? Although economic theories of free markets portray consumers as selfish agents trying to maximize their economic benefits, an emerging body of research suggests that this description is incomplete and inaccurate. Consumers are not just influenced by economic considerations but also by moral considerations, such as fairness (e.g., Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1986) and altruism (Batson 2010). However, the pervasiveness and the extent of moral considerations in consumer behavior continues to be debated.

One viewpoint is that morality is peripheral to economic choices, and consumers are predominantly driven by self-interest. Consumers might claim that they care about morality; however, when it comes to actually parting with their money, self-interest (i.e., price, budget, personal preferences, quality) is paramount. In fact, some researchers have argued that merely participating in marketplace exchanges erodes

morality (Falk and Szech 2013), suggesting that moral considerations and economic considerations are inherently incompatible in everyday decision making. Relatedly, others have argued morality is not a key consideration in economic decisions, but merely a constraint on the free market system (Sandel 2012). Even when scholars acknowledge that moral considerations like fairness impact consumer choices, they are portrayed as frictions in the rational choice model (Kahneman et al. 1986). Thus, per this viewpoint, moral considerations have a peripheral influence on economic behaviors and could be considered an external constraint on the homo economicus trying to maximize utility.

An alternative viewpoint is that moral considerations have a pervasive influence on consumer behavior. A growing body of research has begun to demonstrate that morality can play a meaningful role in shaping marketplace attitudes and consumer preferences, such as reactions to branding, corporate activism, pricing decisions, product attributes, market design, and so forth (Rozin 1999; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001; Campbell and Winterich 2018; Philipp-Muller, Teeny, and Petty 2022; Ramos et al. 2024). This body of work suggests that morality is a central feature of consumers’ preference function, and moral utility can actively shape consumption (Goenka and Thomas 2024). Our aim in this editorial is to review the evidence supporting this viewpoint, present an integrative framework to characterize why and how moral considerations influence consumer behavior, and situate the research in this issue within this framework.

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We start with the premise that human beings are inherently moral creatures with an innate, often reflexive, motivation to evaluate the morality of everyday decisions and behaviors, and this motivation influences their consumption decisions and behaviors. We outline three moral motives that explain why and how moral considerations influence consumer behavior. Each motive is associated with a distinct mindset, activating a set of beliefs about right and wrong behaviors in a given context. The first motive drives consumers to engage in moral behaviors to achieve good societal outcomes. We call this the *moral-beneficence* motive. The second motive drives consumers to engage in moral behaviors as a road to building a good self. We call this the *moral-self* motive. Finally, the third motive makes consumers engage in moral behaviors because they consider it their duty to do so, regardless of the outcomes or its impact on their self-image. We call this the *moral-duty* motive.

Notably, these three motives loosely align with the moral philosophies of utilitarianism, hedonism, and deontology, respectively. We direct readers to the thought-provoking article by Lamberton and colleagues (2025) in this issue, titled “Hidden Commitments and Future Opportunities: Implicit Moral Philosophies in Consumer Psychology” for an overview of the three philosophies. This thought piece outlines how these three philosophies shape implicit assumptions in consumer research, both among consumers and researchers. To avoid redundancy, we will not describe the related philosophical theories here. Instead, we aim to characterize the psychological concomitants of these theories. We posit that utilitarian, hedonistic, and deontological considerations activate distinct moral belief systems and evaluative perspectives in consumer decision making, explaining and helping predict when and why morality influences marketplace choices. These motives may operate jointly to drive a moral behavior simultaneously, the strength of the motives can be context-dependent, consumers have different sensitivities to these motives, and these motives may also predict divergent moral assessments of marketplace behaviors. We use this framework to synthesize some seemingly unrelated findings on marketplace morality and, more specifically, locate the articles in this issue. Finally, we touch on how scholars can utilize this “Three Moral Motives Framework” to further our understanding of marketplace morality.

MORAL-BENEFICENCE MOTIVE

We posit that one reason consumers engage in moral behaviors is because they see it as a way to achieve good societal

outcomes. Scholars have argued that morality evolved as a means to help us form cooperative relations and solve complex societal problems pertaining to the allocation of scarce resources (Broom 2006). As humans coalesced into larger social groups, they faced major societal issues such as protecting and allocating scarce resources. Consequently, moral systems developed to provide humans with intuitive rules to solve these societal challenges (Haidt 2012). In that, moral values act as an evolutionary heuristic mechanism to offer solutions for complex societal problems (Greene 2014). For example, the moral value of equality developed as a guide to help humans distribute scarce food, water, and other scarce resources within a society. The principle of equality provides an intuitive solution to this problem: distribute the food equally amongst all community members.

Extending these theories to the marketplace, we argue that consumers often see consumption as a means to solve societal problems and achieve good outcomes. Humans continue to face many large societal problems, ranging from environmental degradation to social inequality and safety threats. And many people are motivated to act on these problems, turning to marketplace consumption as an effective means to achieving the beneficial outcomes they seek.

The moral-beneficence motive can explain why some consumers sometimes gladly incur a higher cost for a product that provides moral utility, even though the product might not be superior in quality to competing products. For instance, why do consumers pay a higher price for Fair-trade coffee? Consumers who have a moral-beneficence motive believe that purchasing fair-trade coffee will solve the societal problem of inequality and labor exploitation, helping to build a more equitable society and promoting human rights (i.e., achieving a morally desirable societal outcome).

Crucially, the notion that the moral-beneficence motive influences purchase decisions is based on the premise that consumers balance self-interest with moral values because the desired societal outcome provides some positive utility. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the trade-off between self-interest and the desired societal outcome may not, in many cases, be entirely altruistic. The beneficence-guided purchase decision may still be considered self-interest, as the consumer could benefit in the long term from the realization of the desired societal outcome (i.e., environmental protection can provide the consumer with cleaner air).

One canonical example of the moral-beneficence motive at work is the movement of effective altruism. People who engage in effective altruism select charitable causes based

solely on the value of the societal benefit achieved by the donation and not for any other benefit (Caviola, Schubert, and Greene 2021). Relatedly, the theory of dyadic morality (Schein and Gray 2018) proposes that behavior is motivated by the implicit or explicit desire to minimize harmful outcomes. More specifically, many vegans shun meat because they are trying to minimize the societal suffering of millions of animals (Singer 2009). And research on corporate social responsibility suggests that consumers are more likely to support firms that are transparent about their goals and demonstrate effectiveness in promoting the social cause (Sen, Du, and Bhattacharya 2016). Other work has argued that consumers are more likely to engage in sustainable consumption when the eco-benefits are salient and tangible (White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019).

The postulate that consumers have a moral-beneficence motive also presents some interesting substantive implications for marketers. Because the critical driving feature of moral consumption is the implicit or explicit focus on the outcomes, managers trying to attract these consumers might benefit from emphasizing the product's efficacy in solving societal problems. To the extent consumers of fair-trade coffee are motivated by beneficence, for instance, brands that highlight how the product benefits farmers might garner higher shares in the coffee market ("Buy fair-trade because it helps farmers"). Additionally, brands that highlight both societal benefits as well as personal benefit to the user might be more appealing to consumers with moral-beneficence motive ("Buy fair-trade because it helps farmers and provides you better quality coffee").

An important characteristic of the moral-beneficence motive is that there is no one optimal or ideal moral consumption. This is because consumers prioritize different societal problems, some prioritizing solutions to climate change, whereas others prioritizing crime prevention. Moreover, consumers can have different desired solutions and outcomes for the same societal problem. For instance, some consumers may believe that the solution to climate change is reducing overall consumption, whereas others may believe in shifting to more sustainable forms of consumption. Thus, to understand how the moral-beneficence motive guides consumption, one must also understand the outcomes and goals desired by the consumer.

MORAL-SELF MOTIVE

We posit that the second reason consumers engage in moral consumption is because it is a means to develop one's self worth and portray a moral self to others. Scholars have ar-

gued that morality is a key aspect of what it means to be human (Gray, Young, and Waytz 2012). In fact, Pinker (2008) argued that "moral goodness is what gives each of us the sense that we are worthy human beings." Consequently, morality is considered a core aspect of a person's identity and shapes a person's self-view (Aquino and Reed 2002). Morality is also theorized to be a means to protect the self and one's self-image from physical and psychological threats (Rozin, Haidt, and Fincher 2009; Trudel et al. 2020). Moreover, moral character is one of the primary traits that shapes person-perception (Goodwin, Piazza, and Rozin 2014). Thus, morality is a path for people to build their self-identity and self-worth, and signal this to others.

Extending these theories to the marketplace, we argue that moral consumption provides people with one means to increase their self-worth, build their self-image, and craft their identity. As a corollary, moral consumption also provides consumers an opportunity to signal their self-identity to others. Returning to the question: "why do consumers pay a higher price for fair-trade coffee?" Consumers who have a moral-self motive purchase fair-trade coffee to signal to themselves and possibly others in their social circle that they are a "good person."

Crucially, moral consumption driven by the moral-self motive is inherently self-serving in nature; the moral utility from consumption is derived from the benefits to the self. For instance, while the purchase of a moral product may indeed benefit some social cause, consumers are consciously or unconsciously focused on how such a purchase benefits themselves. Thus, when consumption is driven by moral-self motive, consumers are not balancing self-interest with the greater good. Rather, the moral utility of consumption comprises yet another form of self-serving value.

One canonical example of when the moral-self motive drives moral behaviors is the theory of selfish altruism. This theory posits that true altruism does not exist; people's motivation to act charitably is always guided, at least in part, by some self-serving motive such as warm glow, distress-reducing benefits to the self, or reputational gains from social recognition (Cialdini, Darby, and Vincent 1973; Andreoni 1990). Other streams of literature also support the notion that marketplace moral behaviors are driven by this moral-self motive. For instance, research has shown that linking sustainable consumption to self-interest can increase consumer purchases (Green and Peloza 2014). Furthermore, the desire to self-signal can drive ethical purchases (Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh 2010) and blood donations (Yang and Hsee 2022).

The postulate that consumers have a moral-self motive also presents some specific substantive implications for marketers. Because the critical driving feature of moral consumption is the implicit or explicit focus on self-image, managers need to emphasize the product's benefit for the self to stimulate moral consumption. In other words, to encourage sales of fair-trade coffee, managers need to specify how the consumption will build the consumers' self ("Buy fair-trade because you are a good person").

MORAL-DUTY MOTIVE

The third reason consumers engage in moral behaviors is because they believe that performing a moral action is their duty or purpose in life. Contrary to the previous two motives, where moral utility was derived from either the societal or the self-benefit, consumers driven by the moral-duty motive derive intrinsic utility from performing a moral action regardless of the outcome. In other words, people engage in moral consumption not because it will achieve some societal goal or help the self but rather because it is "the right thing to do."

For centuries, philosophical and religious moral systems have attempted to divorce moral actions from societal and self-image benefits. They guide people to perform moral actions not because it will promote cooperation or make you feel good but because it is the "right thing to do." For instance, Kantian deontology argues that people must follow moral principles regardless of consequences and emotions (Kant 1785/2002). For example, Kant argues that rules and duties must guide moral actions, and people should seek to abide by these rules without concern for anything else.

Although Kantian deontology stems from intricate reasoning, most lay people get a sense of right versus wrong actions from religion. And most religious moral systems tend to be duty-based. For instance, Christianity espouses a rule-based moral system (e.g., the Ten Commandments). Islam also prophesizes five pillars that are the duties of all Muslims (Rahman 2020). Similarly, the basis of Hindu teachings is that people should strive to perform their duty towards their family and community to accrue good karma (Tharoor 2019). In fact, the Bhagavad Gita, the influential Hindu scripture, explicitly decrees that people must perform their moral duty without regard to the consequences of the action or any desire for self-benefit (Prabhupada 2011). Similarly, Buddhist principles propose that people must do moral deeds to accumulate good merit, which ultimately paves the path to nirvana (Mick 2016). Therefore, it seems reasonable to expect that many consumers, especially reli-

gious or spiritual ones, will be influenced by this moral duty motive.

Extending this to the marketplace, we propose that consumers may also engage in moral consumption because performing the moral action is itself the goal. That is, people are seeking to purchase moral products because they believe that it is "the right thing to do." Returning to the question: "Why do consumers pay a higher price for Fair-trade coffee?" Consumers who have a moral-duty motive purchase Fair-trade coffee because they follow moral rules and want to perform a moral action. In other words, consumers are not seeking utility from any societal outcome or self-benefits when purchasing moral products; the very act of purchasing a moral product provides the utility.

There is burgeoning empirical evidence supporting our postulate that following one's duty is an important motive for moral behaviors. It has been shown that when people engage in moral behaviors, they often focus on the duty dictated by a particular moral rule as opposed to stressing the societal consequences or self-image benefits of the behavior (Greene and Haidt 2002). People who morally oppose genetically modified foods tend to do so because they feel they are performing a moral act; consequently, they are insensitive to any societal or personal benefits the products provide (Scott, Inbar, and Rozin 2016). Research has also shown that some low-income consumers shun welfare programs because they act on moral principles, even though accepting welfare would bring societal and obvious personal benefits (Goenka and Thomas 2022).

As with the other two motives, this moral-duty motive also presents some specific practical implications for marketers. Because the critical driving feature of moral consumption is the implicit or explicit focus on performing moral duty, managers need to emphasize how consuming the product in question is a moral duty (e.g., "Buy fair-trade because it is the right thing to do"). Indeed, research has shown that as product categories become positively moralized, consumers will gravitate toward them while staying away from negatively moralized products (Rozin 1999).

INTERPLAY OF THE THREE MOTIVES

The three motives in our framework may operate simultaneously to have additive or interactive effects in predicting moral consumption. For instance, all three motives—moral-beneficence, moral-self, and moral-duty—could work together to motivate the purchase of fair-trade coffee. Similarly, it is possible that people donate money because they wish to aid a particular social cause, improve their self-worth, signal their

moral self to others, or think it is an essential moral action to perform.

Importantly, however, we believe that the three motives do not have the same potency for all individuals across all situations. Some individuals are more enduringly sensitive to a specific moral motive. Similarly, the relative effects of the three moral motives are also context-dependent; certain contexts increase the salience of a specific moral motive, increasing its relative strength as a driver of moral behaviors in the marketplace. Finally, there may be contexts where these motives compete to predict entirely divergent moral behaviors. We discuss each of these in turn.

Individual Differences in the Three Motives

Different consumer segments may have different sensitivities to the three motives, with consequent differences in their propensity to rely on one of the three motives in consumption decisions. Extant research helps us understand these individual differences. For instance, researchers have created scales to understand the extent to which consumers might endorse a utilitarian or deontological thinking style (Kahane et al. 2018; Love, Salinas, and Rotman 2020). These scales could be used to predict the extent to which moral-duty motives and moral-beneficence motives drive consumers. Similarly, it is also possible to assess individual differences in moral-self motives. The theory of moral identity argues that consumers differ in the degree to which morality is central to their sense of self (Aquino and Reed 2002), allowing us to understand consumer-specific sensitivity to the moral-self motive.

Another theory that allows us to understand and investigate the heterogeneity in moral motives is the Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt 2007; Atari et al. 2023). This theory proposes that consumers have different intuitive moral beliefs that guide their attitudes and behaviors. Researchers have used this theory to investigate how different moral values can lead to divergent consumption choices (Goenka and Thomas 2020, 2023; Ramos et al. 2024). Interestingly, this theory encompasses both individual differences in desired societal outcomes as well as differences in perceptions of moral duty. People have different moral beliefs that they hold sacred (e.g., fairness vs. authority), and they wish to see different types of societal structures (e.g., egalitarian vs. hierarchical). Thus, Moral Foundations Theory can be particularly helpful in understanding differences across consumers in moral-beneficence and moral-duty motives.

As illustrated by the above discussion, our Three Moral Motives Framework can help researchers gain an integrative

understanding of different extant perspectives of consumer morality, highlighting the distinct assumptions that underlie each perspective. Specifically, some perspectives assume that moral-beneficence motive is the primary driver of moral conduct in the marketplace, while others ascribe the moral-self motive or the moral-duty motive as the primary driver. In developing a holistic framework of consumer morality in terms of three interplaying moral motives, we aim for richer, more comprehensive characterization of moral behaviors in the marketplace. In particular, our Three Moral Motives Framework offers an integrative, coherent account of heterogeneity in consumers' moral judgments. We encourage future research to utilize these theories from extant research in combination with our Three Moral Motives Framework, interpreting the former in terms of the latter, to understand individual differences in moral motivations and actions in the marketplace. In addition, understanding segment-specific variations in consumers' sensitivity to each of the three motives will help relevant actors design more targeted campaigns centered on the most relevant motive to encourage the desired moral behaviors in particular consumer segments.

The Contextual Dominance of the Three Motives

Aside from individual differences, there may be certain contexts wherein the relative strength of one motive is increased such that it dominates the others to be the driving force of moral behavior. For instance, if a consumer learns about the exploitation of farmers from the media, her moral-beneficence motive is likely to be activated and become, *ceteris paribus*, the key driver of her purchase of fair-trade coffee. Alternatively, a visit to a crowded farmers' market might activate a consumer's moral-self motive, causing her to purchase fair-trade coffee at the market to signal their moral worth to others when she would not have otherwise, ordinarily, purchased such coffee online. In other words, the same behavior of purchasing fair-trade coffee may be driven by different moral motives depending upon the decision and/or purchase context.

There are likely also contexts wherein one motive is weakened, and thus, moral behavior is mitigated. For instance, the literature on moral licensing shows that often, after a person's self-concept has been positively boosted, that person no longer feels the need to engage in moral consumption (Khan and Dhar 2006). This is a case where the moral-self motive is attenuated by the self-esteem boosting context, attenuating the potency of this particular motive as a driver of subsequent moral behavior.

We encourage future research to use our Three Moral Motives Framework to understand how different contexts may increase or decrease the strength of the three motives. Such an understanding is particularly critical for those trying to encourage moral consumption behavior as the context is often amenable, through communication design, for instance, to optimize the triggering or salience of the motive deemed to be the most efficacious. More generally, understanding the effect of context on the sharpening versus the weakening of the salience, and the consequent impact, of a particular motive will help provide a more nuanced understanding of why consumers engage in moral consumption in different settings. Interestingly, our framework implies that if a particular context weakens one moral motive, it can be compensated for by the strengthening of the other two motives to restore moral behaviors.

The Competing Effect of the Three Motives

The three motives may also compete to predict divergent moral behaviors in particular consumption contexts. For instance, a consumer may be faced with a choice of two organic fair-trade coffee brands. Brand A emphasizes its fair-trade feature and highlights its positive impact on society (“By purchasing this coffee, you will uplift the farming community in Colombia”), while brand B emphasizes its organic features and highlights the positive image of consumers who use this brand (“Join the elite community of socially conscious consumers who care about the future”). The moral-beneficence motive would guide consumers to choose brand A, but the moral-self motive would guide consumers to choose brand B, leading thus to different outcomes, depending on the context and the consumer.

The competing effect of these motives also helps us understand and reconcile conflicting findings pertaining to morality in the marketplace. For instance, are consumers magnitude insensitive in moral consumption? Some theories argue that consumers are sensitive to the scope of harm occurring in a moral scenario in making their moral choices (Schein and Gray 2018). However, other research has shown that consumers are magnitude insensitive to the benefits of moral consumption (Trudel and Cotte 2009). These conflicting findings may be reconciled by understanding the differential predictions of the motives. The moral-beneficence motive predicts that consumers should be scope-sensitive; as the benefits increase, the moral behavior increases. However, the moral-duty motive proposes that consumers are likely to be scope insensitive as long as they have abided by the relevant moral rule. Thus, these divergent effects

might manifest because the different motives are driving behavior in specific contexts.

Similarly, the different motives might help us understand when and why consumers engage in moral licensing versus moral consistency (Mullen and Monin 2016). The moral-self motive predicts that once consumers have sufficiently boosted their self-worth through moral behaviors, they may subsequently feel licensed to engage in immoral behaviors. However, the moral-duty motive predicts that consumers are likely to be more consistent in their moral behaviors, applying and following deontological rules across time and contexts.

Given that the different motives might lead to conflicting behaviors depending on the context and the consumer, we encourage future research to utilize our Three Moral Motives Framework to investigate consumption scenarios wherein these motives conflict and predict seemingly contradictory behaviors. Understanding the divergent predictions of the motives can help shed light on the complexities, and thus deepen our understanding, of consumer moral decisions in the marketplace.

A MOTIVES-BASED SYNTHESIS OF MORALITY IN THE MARKETPLACE

Finally, we try to interpret and synthesize the findings from the eight empirical articles in this issue using our Three Moral Motives Framework with the goal of providing a deeper, more nuanced sense of when, how, and why these motives might operate in the marketplace. We start with Kim, Lee, and Lee’s (2025) article, “In Touch with Those in Need: How Touchscreen Devices Lead Consumers to Support Social Causes,” which shows that people are more likely to donate when they use touch screens than when they use a desktop computer. They argue that haptic interactions are more likely to evoke empathy, which in turn increases donations. In this case, donations seem to be driven by a moral-beneficence motive, which, the findings show, is not always based on deliberative moral reasoning. The moral-beneficence motive can be activated and enhanced by contextual elements (i.e., the use of a touchscreen), which can trigger moral emotions such as empathy and produce acts of beneficence.

Next, Segal and Menon’s (2025) article—“Moral Wiggle Room through Ambiguity as a Foot in the Door: Can We Tap into Consumers’ (Illusions of) Prosociality for Good?”—demonstrates that people are more willing to sign up for prosocial opportunities when there is greater ambiguity in the likelihood of performing the prosocial behavior. For instance, when consumers are told they might (vs. will definitely)

be called upon to volunteer for a prosocial cause, more people are willing to sign up. The ambiguity enables people to maintain an illusion of prosociality while feeling less personally responsible for following through with prosocial behavior. Interestingly, the authors found no difference in actual prosocial behavior after people had signed up for the opportunity. This article demonstrates the dynamics underlying the moral-self motive. The desire to maintain a “good self” view allows people to harness ambiguity in prosocial situations, realizing the benefit of prosocial behavior for the self without possibly incurring the costs.

Cesario and Bellezza’s (2025) article, “Knowledge, Morality, and the Appeal of Counterfeit Luxury Goods,” suggests that consumer morality in the domain of luxury goods often operates through the moral-self motive. They find that consumers who are less knowledgeable about luxury brands do not see any moral objections to purchasing counterfeit luxury products. This is because less knowledgeable consumers can easily generate reasons to justify their purchase of counterfeit luxury brands. More knowledgeable consumers, in contrast, struggle to justify the purchase of counterfeits. Luxury purchases usually entail self-signaling and social signaling of status. For high-knowledge customers, purchasing counterfeits would seem the wrong way to signal status. However, low-knowledge consumers who cannot distinguish between the original luxury brand and counterfeits might have no moral qualms about purchasing luxury. Thus, when purchase decisions entail self or social signaling, moral judgments might operate through the moral-self motive. Importantly, our framework suggests marketers can stop purchases of luxury goods by highlighting how it diminishes the moral self.

Ton, Smith, and Sevilla’s (2025) article, “Morality and Continuity Authenticity Trade-offs in the Removal of Unethical Founders,” shows that firing an unethical founder does not necessarily enhance a brand’s reputation. The authors show that when brand founders transgress morally, consumers trade off perceptions of immorality with considerations of continuity authenticity, or the extent to which a brand stays true to its essence, causing them to not always react favorably to the founders’ firing. Given that consumers in this article are responding to transgressions pertaining primarily to the moral foundational principle of harm/care, the motives consumers bring to these judgments have a distinct moral-duty flavor; sexual harassment and body shaming are seen by most as categorically wrong, and consumers do indeed penalize a brand when they deem the transgressions to be sufficiently severe. More generally,

this article, like several others in this issue, locates moral motives in the broader context of marketplace judgments, showing that non-moral motives can modulate the extent to which consumers’ concomitant moral motives might hold sway in their judgments of others (founders, brands) and likely themselves. Of course, certain dimensions of authenticity have been linked to morality, representing trade-offs that consumers might have to make as they pursue the moral-duty motive, pointing to future work focused on elucidating these deontological conflicts.

A similar trade-off characterizes Dommer’s (2025) article, “Acting Immorally to Self-Enhance: The Role of Diagnostic Self-Deception,” but between consumers’ own ego-affirming motives to index favorably on desirable traits such as health and intelligence and their moral-self motive. Specifically, this research demonstrates that when the rewards from cheating on tests of intelligence, health, and so forth are intrinsic (i.e., self-enhancement), consumers naturally cheat, ostensibly minimizing or ignoring their moral-self motive, for such intrinsic rewards allows them to deceive themselves about some positive aspect of their self-concept. Thus, this article is similar to Ton et al.’s (2025) article in that it is about how other motives (e.g., seeing ourselves as smart or healthy) trump moral considerations. More generally, both these articles are consistent with prior work that documents the considerable flexibility consumers bring to their interpretations/assessments of their thoughts and actions in the moral domain in the interests of other, possibly greater gains. While it would seem that such flexibility would be less feasible if consumers’ motivations pertained to moral duty or even moral beneficence, which are more objectively determined, a clearer, more precise sense of the extent to which each motive allows for moral flexibility awaits further investigation.

Levy and colleagues’ (2025) article, “From Sinners to Saints: How Redemption Stories Motivate Charitable Giving,” documents a different pathway to charitable donations triggered by context-induced emotions. They show that stories of moral redemption—a story of a person who was a moral failure but later becomes a moral paragon through perseverance and hard work—inspire greater donations. In this case, charitable behaviors seem to be driven by a moral-self motive. Donors felt a feeling of elevation—a combination of inspiration, awe, and admiration—when they read these moral redemption stories. This suggests that the incidental cues activated the moral self-motive: the donor felt inspired by the redemption story and possibly aspired to be like the hero of the redemption story. Consistent with this hypothesis, the authors also found that the effect of moral elevation

manifested only for those donors who had internalized a strong moral identity.

Next, Vo and Choe (2025) demonstrate in their article “Fate, Forgiveness, and Brands: How Karmic Belief Impacts Consumer Attitudes toward Transgressing Brands” that consumers’ negative reactions to brand transgressions are mitigated by their endorsement of karmic beliefs. Specifically, a stronger belief in karma makes people more likely to forgive moral transgressions. Seen through the Three Moral Motives Framework, this article provides interesting insight into the nature of the moral-duty motive and how it shapes consumer responses to, as in the case of Ton et al., brand transgressions. As discussed earlier, the moral-duty motive is rooted in consumers’ religious, philosophical, and/or spiritual belief systems. A key element of many such systems is the belief in an omniscient and omnipotent higher power, and a set of associated moral dictates. One prevalent principle in this constellation of beliefs is that pertaining to karma, or the notion that moral justice, in the face of good or bad acts by humans, is inevitably meted out by a higher power. The authors build on this notion to suggest that for many consumers the world over, viewing immoral marketplace actors through a moral-duty lens involves surrendering to their karmic beliefs, causing them to be more personally forgiving of such actors.

Finally, Nasa and colleagues’ (2025) article, “The Moral Compass of Identity: Ethical Predispositions Predict the Importance Consumers Ascribe to Their Group and Individual Identities,” demonstrates how consumers’ endorsement of formalism versus utilitarianism can shape the importance of their individual and group identities. The article shows that consumers who endorse a deontological thinking style tend to emphasize their group identities (e.g., American). In contrast, consumers who endorse a utilitarian thinking style tend to emphasize individual identities (e.g., artist). In other words, this article empirically demonstrates how the moral-beneficence and moral-duty motives can predict different consumer identities and ultimately lead to divergent consumer behaviors.

CONCLUSION

In this editorial, we introduce and articulate the Three Moral Motives Framework to understand and predict consumers’ moral behaviors. We argue that moral behaviors in the marketplace are driven by three motives—moral-beneficence, moral-self, and moral-duty. These motives explain when, how, and why consumers seek moral utility in

their consumption preferences. Notably, these motives may work conjointly to drive moral behavior, consumers may have different sensitivities to these motives, one motive may be weakened or strengthened to influence behaviors in certain contexts, and these motives might operate in opposition to predict divergent moral choices. This framework can be applied to reconcile the literature on conflicting moral behaviors and comprise, more generally, one viable conceptual substrate from which to build a coherent, integrative understanding of morality in the marketplace. We encourage future research to build upon this framework by identifying the context- and person-specific drivers that influence the operation of these motives. In addition, we hope future research will utilize this framework to develop suitable and effective interventions to influence moral behaviors in the marketplace in the interest of the greatest good.

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