Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

Executive summary of “Volunteering as a mechanism to reduce guilt over purchasing luxury items”

This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of the article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present.

Prior work has examined the significance of “self-licensing”. This describes how an individual might use the likes of “effort and good deed” as a means to rationalize subsequent actions that reflect gratification, bias or behavior which is immoral or illegal. If this sense of justification results from prior moral actions, it is referred to as “moral licensing”.

Evidence of self-licensing and moral licensing effects has been found in different studies. How earlier behaviors influence subsequent choice is also a feature of such work. In one example, pledging to “help the needy” was seen as establishing and then activating “moral credentials” which then made people feel entitled to select luxury products over ones regarded as more practical.

Anecdotal support for the impact of self-licensing has also been noted. Some scholars found that promising to make a charitable donation had a greater impact on the licensing of “frivolous products” as opposed to utilitarian ones. Others contend that it is possible to prime individuals to behave in comparable ways by ascribing them with positive characteristics. Any indication or intention towards honorable behavior apparently grants people a license to later act in manners that can be construed as anti-social, unethical or self-indulgent. This tendency has also been found to prompt normally impartial individuals to demonstrate prejudicial actions.

Work conducted more recently has identified factors that potentially strengthen or assuage the impact of moral licensing. These include self-control and other consumer traits and different contextual variables. With respect to the latter, an experiment found that those completing an unpaid charitable act were prone to behave selfishly in subsequent behavior. But people who received payment for a good deed indicated that considerate actions were a likelier outcome.

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It was pointed out by some analysts that prior good work increases the sense of “moral self-evaluation” which in turn provides greater validation for selecting luxury items or displaying prejudiced behavior later on. Guilt will normally influence choice and the literature argues that “frugality” is the standard. Indulgent or luxury items are conversely seen as violation of a social or personal norm. However, one proposition is that prior engagement in righteous acts serves to lessen such perceptions and the usual influence of guilt. Although these methods for reducing guilt have been discussed, empirical research is thus far lacking.

Indications from earlier work are tested further by Koo & Jeong by means of conducting three experiments conducted with groups of university students in South Korea. In the first, some participants were placed into the license condition and informed about a scenario where they were to be carrying out volunteering work for four hours each week over a four-week period. The work involved cleaning duties at an establishment housing the disabled. The remainder were put in the control condition and given a quiz-related task similar in duration to reading the volunteering scenario. All subjects then completed a totally unrelated task and then exposed to a different situation in which a visiting adult relative presented them with a $300 gift voucher, a gesture common with Korean culture. After this, participants were instructed to imagine they would visit a shopping mall to spend the voucher on a pair of shoes. Advertisements showing details of a value shoe brand and a luxury shoe brand and their respective prices were provided and subjects were asked to indicate their purchase intention towards both.

The second experiment departed from previous studies by measuring moral self-evaluation both before and after the manipulation. All subjects were initially asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with four statements measuring their moral self-evaluation. They were then organized into three groups: intention to engage in volunteering for three hours per week over the next 12 weeks; had already spent time doing volunteer work over a four-week period; and a control group. The volunteering work was similar to that in the first experiment, as was the random puzzle-related task completed by the control group. Moral self-evaluation was then re-measured and subjects responded to statements measuring the control variables sale proneness, propensity for conspicuous consumption and orientation towards volunteering. They were also asked to indicate their intention to buy the value brand and luxury brand, which were both priced at $100 on this occasion.

In the final experiment, those in the licensing condition were presented with a scenario in which they would help a disabled student in classes for nine weeks. Another puzzle-type task was completed by the control group. After a filler task, all respondents were asked about commitment to long-term goals such as volunteering and their thoughts about the progress they had made towards achieving them. Further questions related to purchase intention towards the value and the luxury brands and consumption guilt. The same three control variables used in the previous experiment were also measured.

Analysis revealed that:

- those in the licensing condition showed similar intention to purchase the value brand and were more likely to buy the luxury brand than subjects in the control condition;
- higher levels of moral licensing existed in both volunteering groups than in the control group;
• compared to the control group, likelihood of purchasing
  the value brand was lower among those in the moral
  licensing condition;
• guilt was lower among those engaging in volunteer work
  than those not intending to volunteer; and
• guilt acts to partially mediate the impact of licensing on
  intention to buy luxury items.

These results suggest people believe that volunteering
provides justification for choosing a luxury item over a value
alternative. The exercise also confirmed the mediating effect
of moral self-evaluation on the relationship between licensing
and purchase intention.

It was additionally found that commitment to long term
goals was comparable across license and control conditions.
Those in the license condition, however, believed they had
made greater progress towards attaining their goal. On this
evidence, the authors contend that such perceptions prompt
people to feel warranted in temporarily abandoning pursuit of
their current goal in favor of “goal-deviant” behaviors like
buying luxury products. These findings provide support for
previous claims about the validity of “passive goal guidance”.

Other studies have indicated that principled consumers
refrain from buying luxury brands. The present work reveals
how moral behavior like volunteering can actually drive such
purchase behavior. Koo & Jeong also point out how the
licensing effect is confirmed here but acknowledge that other
marketing variables are likely to be significant.

Marketers are advised that scope exists to prime
individuals who have performed good deeds to act in certain
ways later on. The authors suggest that consumers who
have engaged in volunteering or other ethical behaviors
could be targeted with luxury products. A related strategy
would be to find ways of boosting the moral self-concept of
targeted consumers by highlighting their previous ethical
actions. This might be achieved more subliminally through
online contexts such as social media channels. They are
advised not to directly connect these actions with more
“frivolous choices” though. Another possibility is to exploit
the effect of guilt by advertising luxury brands which are
linked to worthy causes.

Different types of moral actions could be subsequently
explored in studies using samples from different population
groups and cultures. Conducting field experiments can further
understanding of the licensing effect. Investigating whether
the process is subliminal or conscious is another research
option that might also consider the possible joint mediation of
self-attribution and reduced guilt.

To read the full article, enter 10.1108/JPBM-01-2015-0784
into your search engine.

(A précis of the article “Volunteering as a mechanism to reduce guilt
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