



Feeling Good by Doing Good: A Selfish Motivation for Ethical Choice

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Abstract

This paper examines the question of why consumers engage in ethical consumption. The authors draw on self-affirmation theory to propose that the choice of an ethical product serves a self-restorative function. Four experiments provide support for this assertion: a self-threat increases consumers' choice of an ethical option, even when the alternative choice is objectively superior in quantity (Study 1) and product quality (Study 2). Further, restoring self-esteem through positive feedback eliminates this increase in ethical choice (Studies 2 and 3). As an additional test of the robustness of our results, a final study examined the effect of self-threat on choice in a field setting (Study 4). The findings indicate that ethical purchases are not just altruistic. They hold purposeful individual value and can help in the self-restorative process. Implications for managers making decisions regarding investment in ethical product features are discussed.

Keywords Ethical consumption · Sustainability · Self-affirmation · Self-restoration · Moral choice

Introduction

The emergence of “ethical” criteria in consumers' purchase motivations has led to interest in whether consumers are willing to buy, and even pay more for, products that are labeled Fairtrade (FT), environmentally friendly, or that otherwise claim a benefit for the community or for humanity. Research finds that ethical consumption—defined by Cooper-Martin and Holbrook (1993, p. 113) as “decision-making, purchases and other consumption experiences that are affected by the consumer's ethical concerns”—plays a role in consumer choices. Consumers like and choose products that they perceive as socially responsible, and consumer loyalty and even positive judgments of product features can flow from perceptions of social responsibility (see Sen et al. 2016 for a recent review).

Marketplace surveys show that many consumers profess to take corporate social responsibility (CSR) into account when choosing products. For example, a recent Cone Communication (2017) survey found that 87% of Americans said they would buy a product that supports a social and/or environmental issue they care about, whereas 76% said that they would stop buying products from firms whose ethical stances they do not agree with. There are concerns, however, that survey results may overstate consumer intentions and fail to predict actual choice behavior. This “ethical purchasing gap” (Bray et al. 2011) could be due, among other factors,

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to social desirability effects inherent in the interview context (Auger et al. 2003; De Pelsmacker and Janssens 2007; De Pelsmacker et al. 2005; Freestone and McGoldrick 2008), to the costs associated with ethical consumption, and inertia in purchasing behavior (Bray et al. 2011).

Further, research on ethical consumption often focuses on consumer preferences either for a single product or among choice sets wherein choosing the ethical option does not entail making explicit, meaningful tradeoffs with other coveted product features (Sen et al. 2016). This makes choosing an ethical option relatively easy. When tradeoffs are present, however, choosing the ethical option entails sacrifice, and preference for this option can wane. For example, Luchs et al. (2010) showed that even among consumers who care about ethical product features, a less ethical product will be preferred when product strength is desired (for example, when choosing a car cleaner). Similarly, Auger et al. (2008) found that ethical aspects of a product can lead to purchase intent, but that these social attributes will not compensate for weak functional attributes. In the last decade, studies have begun to explore the circumstances under which consumers will choose ethical products even if such a choice requires sacrifice (e.g., Griskevicius et al. 2010; Gupta and Sen 2013; Kirmani et al. 2017). For example, Griskevicius et al. (2010) found that when consumers were motivated to be seen by others as high in status (by imagining themselves in a high-status situation), they were more likely to forgo high product quality for an ethical option.

As part of this line of investigation into ethical choices that involve tradeoffs, this research explores the role of self-restoration in the choice of ethical products. We have a fundamental need to feel good and virtuous (e.g., Sherman and Cohen 2006), and attaining this sense of self through an ethical product choice may be a worthy motivation for forgoing preferred product attributes. We are most likely to see this motivation operating when there is a deficit in self-esteem, because it is in this circumstance that the need to reinforce self-esteem will be greatest (Steele 1988). Thus, we propose that consumers are more likely to make an ethical product choice that requires sacrifice when their self-esteem is threatened (i.e., they face a self-threat). They do this because there is self-restorative utility in sacrifice that compensates for the loss of desired product attributes. In four experiments, we test for the self-restorative function of ethical consumption choice. A positive finding indicates that ethical purchases are not just about helping others; they, in fact, hold purposeful self-value. Importantly, we attempt to understand the nature of this individual-level value to the consumer of choosing ethically labeled products in an experimental setting wherein subjects' choices reveal their implicit motivations.

Four experiments provide support for our basic contention that a self-threat increases the choice of an ethical product.

This research is the first, to the best of our knowledge, to provide direct evidence for the self-restorative function of ethical consumption: we demonstrate that ethical choices can counter a self-threat by restoring self-esteem. A growing body of research shows that product choices can restore self-esteem in a domain-specific manner (Ferraro et al. 2005; Gao et al. 2009; Sachdeva et al. 2009; Townsend and Sood 2012). Our research builds on this by suggesting that products, such as those containing ethical features, can restore self-integrity in a domain-non-specific manner, as well, making consumers feel better about themselves in general, rather than just confident in a specific domain such as intelligence, morality, or personality (Gao et al. 2009). At the same time, our work comprises further evidence of the emergent notion that consumer choices can not only be, as has been a long-standing premise, self-defining (Fournier 1998; Oyserman 2009), but also, under many circumstances, self-enhancing. In that, our work contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the role of the self in consumption (e.g., Khan and Dhar 2006).

Background

Research on ethical consumption shares the common underlying premise that ethical products are inherently appealing to consumers because they are consonant with, and thus allow consumers to express, their prosocially grounded moral and ethical beliefs. In other words, the value of ethically labeled products, and, therefore, the consumers' motivations for choosing them, resides in their contribution to the social good, as well as in the social signaling or self-expressive function of those products. Research suggests, for example, that consumers will make ethical-label choices out of social concern, altruism, and reciprocity (e.g., Kozinets and Handelman 2004; De Groot and Steg 2009; Smith 1990); in order to be seen by others as virtuous (Baron and Spranca 1997; Griskevicius et al. 2010); or, relatedly, to conform to social pressure (e.g., McGoldrick and Freestone 2008).

Thus, ethical consumption choices tend to be cast as a prosocial act in which consumers' purchase behavior is motivated by the desire to help others or to be seen helping others (Habel et al. 2016; Klein et al. 2005; Sen et al. 2001). For instance, buying a brand of coffee that does not engage in predatory sourcing practices, instead paying farmers a higher wage, allows the consumer to help others. The primarily prosocial basis for ethical consumption is also reflected in the finding that consumers' reactions to CSR initiatives are contingent on their personal support for the social or environmental issue the company seeks to address (Haws et al. 2014; Klein and Dawar 2004; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001).

And yet, even when consumers support a cause represented by an ethical product option, they may not be

willing to tradeoff preferred attributes such as product efficacy (Luchs et al. 2010; Paharia et al. 2013). While survey research shows strong intentions to purchase ethical products, consumers often fail to choose the ethical option, particularly when the ethical choice would entail sacrifice. This disconnect between consumer intentions and actual purchase behavior has been referred to by Janssen and Vanhamme (2015) as the CSR–consumer paradox. These authors and others (e.g., Carrington et al. 2010) have turned to social psychology research on the link between intentions and behavior to better understand the gaps between what consumers say they will do and their actual behavior when it comes to ethical purchases.

In the present research, we also draw on social psychology to better understand the circumstances under which consumers will be more likely to make an ethical choice. Rather than focus on attitude-behavior models (Ajzen 1991), however, we explore the role of self-restoration in ethical consumption. We suggest that the purchase of ethical products is not driven by prosocial motives alone, but also by the need to self-restore. A fundamental human psychological drive is to feel good about ourselves (e.g., Taylor and Brown 1988). A vast literature on the self and identity attests to our need to feel what Steele (1988) refers to as “morally and adaptively adequate,” or that we are “good, virtuous, successful, and able to control important life outcomes” (Sherman and Cohen 2006; Steele 1988). We propose that self-restoration is an important motivator of ethical consumption, particularly in the face of a threat to self-esteem. In so doing, we contribute to an understanding of the “balance between self-interest and the greater good that underlies much of marketplace morality” (Campbell and Winterich 2018).

Self-affirmation theory argues that when our perception of ourselves is threatened by the setbacks and disappointments we all too frequently experience, we attempt to restore our self-worth through a range of cognitive strategies and behaviors (e.g., Steele 1988). Prior research has suggested that product choices serve as a direct means of negating a threat to a certain domain of one’s identity. For instance, Gao et al. (2009) show that when confidence in intelligence is temporarily shaken, products are chosen that help restore confidence in that domain (e.g., their participants chose an “intelligent” product such as a pen over candy). In an examination of donation behavior, Sachdeva et al. (2009) found that when people’s moral self-worth is threatened, they tend to engage in moral cleansing by giving to charity. We argue that expressing one’s preference for an ethical product can, because of its inherent “goodness,” help restore one’s threatened self-esteem, even when the threat is to a domain other than morality. This is consistent with the central tenet of self-affirmation theory that people can respond to self-esteem threats by engaging in self-affirming behaviors (in our case, ethical product choices).

The notion that the choice of ethical products can enhance self-esteem is also consistent with the self-signaling model of diagnostic motivation (Bodner and Prelec 2003). This model draws on notions of self-perception (i.e., adopting an outsider perspective in trying to understand our own actions: Bem 1972; James 1890) to suggest that because people are often inherently uncertain about their own traits, dispositions, motives, and abilities, their choices can provide them with not just the rewards that flow from the causal consequences of the choice (i.e., outcome utility), but also diagnostic utility, which is the pleasure derived from learning something positive about oneself (traits, dispositions, motives). Given this, consumers’ choices often serve a self-signaling purpose, providing needed and valuable evidence about their dispositions, including moral ones (e.g., altruism), contributing, ultimately, to self-esteem (Edinger-Schons et al. 2018; Janssen and Vanhamme 2015).

Our basic aim in this research is to examine whether the choice of an ethically labeled product is motivated by self-restoration needs. In four studies, we place consumers in choice situations preceded by self-threat and examine the effects of self-threat on product choice. In Study 1, we set out to show that ethical products allow for self-restoration after a self-threat. Studies 2 and 3 allow us to further demonstrate the impact of self-threat by exploring whether ethical choice can be reduced when a self-threat is followed by self-restoration before a product choice is made. Study 4 tested the effect of self-threat on product choice in a field setting. Across the four experiments, we use different self-threat manipulations, product categories, and ethical issues, and use both student (Studies 1, 2, and 4) and non-student samples (Study 3), to demonstrate the robustness of our findings. Table 1 provides a summary of the studies.

Study 1

The objective of this experiment was to provide initial evidence that consumers would self-restore through ethical product choice. To do so, we used a well-established manipulation that requires participants to write about their intelligence using their non-dominant hand (Briñol and Petty 2003; Gao et al. 2009). This research has established that this procedure threatens one’s self-confidence, because what is written with the non-dominant hand appears less believable and is seen as “shaky” (Briñol and Petty 2003). Thus, we selected this manipulation to cause a temporary threat to self-esteem.

We are additionally interested in whether consumers will prefer the “ethical” option to the “regular” option when their selves are threatened, even when the regular option is the economically superior choice. We examine this within the context of a Fairtrade product option. The FT label is

Table 1 Overview of studies

Study	Purpose	Sample	Threat	Restoration	Product and tradeoff
1	Does self-threat lead to ethical purchase?	Students $n = 66$	Writing with non-dominant hand	N/A	Chocolate bar (FT bar is smaller)
2	Does self-threat lead to ethical purchase? Does self-restoration reduce ethical choice?	Students $n = 70$	Writing with non-dominant hand	Told they performed well on handwriting task	Chocolate bars (F1 ⁻ bar is smaller)
3	Does self-threat lead to ethical purchase? Does self-restoration reduce ethical choice?	Qualtrics $n = 185$	Math test	Writing about best qualities	Hot chocolate (FT option is lower quality)
4	Does self-threat lead to ethical purchase in a field setting?	Students $n = 84$	Midterm exam results	N/A	Chocolate versus \$1

marketed to consumers as representing products that benefit producer communities and offer a “fair” price for commodity products (Peattie and Samuel 2016). In this study, participants were offered a choice between a regular and an FT chocolate bar. Both the FT and regular chocolate bars were the same price, but the regular bar was larger. Since the regular chocolate bar was the economically dominant choice, we expect that it will be chosen more frequently in the control, non-threat condition but not in the experimental, self-threat condition.

Method

Participants

Sixty-six students (34 women; $M_{Age} = 18.42$) participated in the study for course credit. Participants came to the lab in groups of 15–25, were seated at computer terminals, and were provided an experiment booklet. All responses were written in the booklet.

Design and Procedure

The study had two between-subjects conditions—self-threat and control—adapted from previous self-threat work (Briñol and Petty 2003). Upon arrival, participants were informed that they would be taking part in a series of unrelated studies. Participants in the self-threat condition were told that for the first study they were required to write a short 100-word essay, using their non-dominant hand, developing three arguments illustrating why they are intelligent. They were also told that their handwriting samples would be analyzed and that tasks like this were strong predictors of future success. Participants in the control condition were assigned to write a 100-word essay about their favorite movie with their dominant hand. Following the handwriting manipulation, they answered 20 questions on the state

self-esteem scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree; Heatherton and Polivy 1991). The state self-esteem scale measured three factors of self-esteem: performance, social, and appearance. The performance factor included items like “I feel as smart as others” and “I feel frustrated or rattled about my performance” (see Heatherton and Polivy 1991). While we included the full scale, performance self-esteem is the dimension that is relevant to the study. Next, participants completed a shortened PANAS scale (Watson et al. 1988) in which they were asked to rate how they felt on eight descriptor affect items (motivated, good, energetic, positive, bad, optimistic, happy, relaxed; 1 = not at all like this, 7 = exactly like this). Participants then provided demographic information.

Finally, as our key dependent measure, participants were given a choice between two chocolate bars—a smaller (100 g) FT chocolate bar and a larger (125 g) regular chocolate bar. Price was held constant. To conclude the survey, participants were asked if they had ever purchased either of the chocolate bars in the past. This last item was intended to be used as a confound check.

Pretests

A pretest confirmed that the larger regular bar was perceived to be the economically superior choice. Undergraduate students from the same population ($n = 40$, 24 women) were asked to make a choice between a 100-g FT chocolate bar and a 125-g regular chocolate bar. Half of the participants were asked to choose the product that was the best value for their money, while the other half were asked to make the optimal economic choice. 90% (18/20) of participants in the best-value condition chose the regular chocolate bar ($\beta = 2.20$; $\chi^2 = 8.69$, $p < 0.01$) while 100% (20/20) chose the regular bar when they were asked to make the optimal economic decision. The pretest revealed

that only four participants had ever purchased either of the chocolate bars, and thus the brands were relatively unknown.

Results

Manipulation Checks

Our self-threat manipulation was effective and resulted in lower performance state self-esteem for those in the self-threat condition ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.73$) in comparison to those in the control condition ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 0.58$; $F(1, 64) = 6.36$, $p < 0.05$). Our manipulation did not yield differences in affect (PANAS scale) across our manipulated conditions ($F < 1$). Self-threat did not interact with gender to predict product choice; therefore, the analyses were collapsed across participant gender. Six participants (9.1%; 6 out of 65, as one participant missed this question) indicated that they had purchased one of the chocolate bars in the past. A logistic regression choice as the dependent variable and previous purchase as the independent variable confirmed that previous purchase history did not predict choice ($p = 0.62$).

The key prediction was that participants in the self-threat condition would be more likely to choose the FT chocolate bar even though it is the economically suboptimal option. As expected, a logistic regression revealed that the control group participants chose the FT chocolate bar less often than the regular chocolate bar. As seen in Fig. 1, 39.4% of control participants chose the FT chocolate bar in comparison to 75.8% of participants in the self-threat condition ($\beta = 0.79$, $\chi^2 = 8.45$, $p < 0.01$).

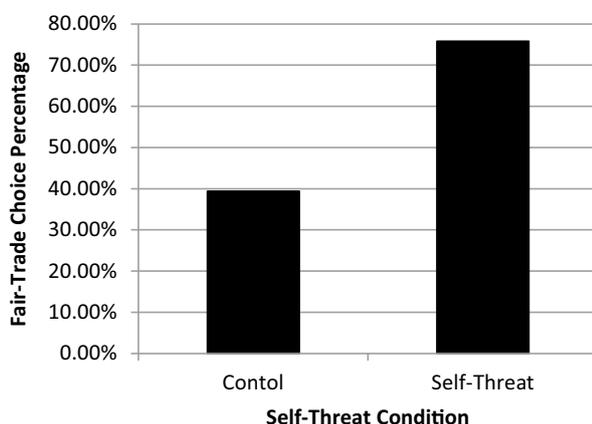


Fig. 1 Percentage of people choosing the Fairtrade option as a function of self-threat—Study 1

Discussion

Consistent with our predictions, this study shows that triggering self-threat in participants makes them more likely to choose an ethical product even when it is the economically inferior choice. An alternative explanation might be that participants might choose the smaller option as a means to self-restore through the avoidance of unhealthy eating and signaling self-control. To rule this out, we ran a similar experiment ($n = 120$) with a choice of large versus small cookies. If consumers can self-restore by signaling self-control, then we would expect a preference for a smaller cookie when under self-threat. Our results showed that participants in both the self-threat and control conditions were equally likely to choose the larger cookie (61.7% and 63.3%, respectively; $= 0.04$, NS), ruling out this explanation. In Studies 2 and 3 below, we manipulate product luxury and quality rather than product size to further rule out this self-control explanation.

Studies 2 and 3 examine whether the choice of ethical products is reduced when an alternative means of self-restoration is available to participants. In Study 2, all the participants receive a self-threat and half the participants are then provided performance feedback. Those receiving positive feedback are able to self-restore while those receiving negative feedback remain in a self-threat state. In Study 3, we replicate Study 2 in a different context and include a non-self-threat control condition for completeness. Further, in Study 3, we manipulate product quality rather than product size to investigate whether or not people will make ethical choices under self-threat even when the ethical products are of lower quality, rather than inferior on size.

Study 2

Method

Participants

Seventy students participated in the study for course credit.

Design and Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two feedback conditions: positive versus negative. All participants were instructed that they would be completing two unrelated studies. They were instructed that the first study was a graphology task, which had been used in prior research to accurately predict academic success. In line with prior research (Heatherton and Polivy 1991), they

were informed that their graphology samples would be scanned and computer analyzed to give them quick feedback on their quantitative and qualitative abilities. All participants then completed the writing task described earlier with their non-dominant hand. The experimenter collected the writing task, and after approximately 10 min, participants in the positive feedback condition were provided a spreadsheet that located their performance in the top 91.85% of all students. The spreadsheet provided to participants in the negative feedback condition located them in the 54th percentile of all students. These numbers were based on a pretest ($n=25$), which indicated that placing in the top 91.85% ($M=3.73$) produced higher state self-esteem scores than placing in the 54th percentile ($M=3.12$; $t(24)=-3.48$, $p=0.002$). Next, participants completed the same state self-esteem scale (Heatherton and Polivy 1991) as in Study 1. Like in the previous study, performance self-esteem is most relevant and most likely to be impacted by our manipulation. Participants again completed a modified PANAS scale (Watson et al. 1988) in which they were asked to rate how they felt on eight descriptor affect items (motivated, good, energetic, positive, bad, optimistic, happy, relaxed; 1 = not at all like this, 5 = exactly like this). Finally, participants chose between the FT and regular chocolate bars.

Results

Manipulation Check

ANOVA revealed that positive feedback produced higher performance self-esteem ($M=3.96$) than negative feedback ($M=3.40$; $F(1,68)=13.91$; $p<0.001$). Feedback did not influence mood as measured by the modified PANAS scale ($F<1$). The main findings are presented below in Fig. 2.

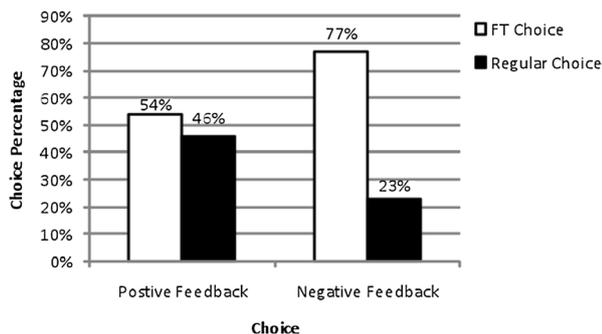


Fig. 2 Choice pattern results for Study 2

FT Choice

A logistic regression of choice (0 = regular option; 1 = FT option) with feedback (0 = negative feedback; 1 = positive feedback) as a predictor revealed that, as expected, the choice share of the FT option was greater in the negative (77.1%) than in the positive group (54.3%; $\beta=1.045$; $\chi^2=3.94$, $p<0.05$). Thus, affirming the threatened self through positive feedback unrelated to choice eliminated the need to self-restore through ethical choice.

Study 3

To test the generalizability of our results, Study 3 utilized a different self-threat manipulation from the one used in Studies 1 and 2, as well as a different self-restoration technique. Further, Study 3 used a different product category and presented products that differed on product quality rather than size. Study 3 was conducted on a non-student sample, and included a control group to allow for a test of our hypotheses against conditions in which there was no self-threat.

Method

Participants

One hundred and eighty-five participants were recruited from an online (Qualtrics panel; 89 men, 92 women; $M_{age}=30.38$ years) covering the general population of U.S. internet users. Participants were paid \$8 to participate. We excluded four participants who did not complete the self-threat manipulation, leaving a total of 181 responses.

Design and Procedure

The study employed a 2 (Self-Threat: self-threat versus control) \times 2 (Self-Restoration: yes versus no) between-subjects design. The self-threat manipulation was adapted from previous research (Sherman et al. 2009). Participants were told that they would be completing a series of unrelated experiments, the first of which was a short math test, which they were told is "often used to determine students' intellectual abilities." The math test for participants in the self-threat condition consisted of five questions drawn from the most difficult items in the GMAT preparation exercises workbook (adapted from Spencer et al. 1999). Participants were given 90 s to answer each question. Questions were chosen specifically to be extremely difficult and thus produce an intellectual threat for participants. For participants in the control condition, the math test consisted of five questions drawn from the easiest items in the GMAT preparation exercises workbook. After completing the math test, participants

completed the state self-esteem scale (Heatherton and Polivy 1991), the shortened PANAS scale (Watson et al. 1988), and some demographic information.

Next, those in the self-restoration condition (approximately half the participants) were asked to write about “your 5 best qualities.” They were subsequently asked to identify “Which of these qualities do people admire most about you?” We expected this manipulation to play a self-restorative function (Brendl et al. 2003; Gao et al. 2009), rendering redundant self-restoration through ethical product choice. The other half of the participants completed a filler task that asked them to write about “the 5 best qualities of the chair that you are sitting in.” All participants were then asked to make a choice between two brands of hot chocolate. Both products were of equal price (\$6.99 per 175 g) but the FT hot chocolate was rated as lower in quality (3 stars) in comparison to the regular hot chocolate (4 stars). The lower rating, by an independent and unbiased source, made the FT hot chocolate the economically suboptimal choice. Finally, participants were asked if they had ever purchased either of the hot chocolate brands in the past.

Pretests

To ensure that our manipulation would produce self-threat, we conducted a pretest to see if the self-threat math questions were perceived as more difficult than the control math questions. Participants from the same population ($n = 82$; 43 men) were randomly assigned to complete and rate one of the two math tests on a seven-point scale anchored at very difficult (1) and very easy (7). The self-threat math questions were judged to be much more difficult ($M = 2.28$) than the control math test ($M = 4.78$; $F(1, 81) = 108.57, p < 0.001$).

Results

Manipulation Checks

An ANOVA on self-esteem confirmed our manipulation. The math test was effective as a self-threat manipulation as evidenced by a significant main effect of self-threat on state self-esteem. Participants in the self-threat condition reported lower state self-esteem ($M = 2.95, SD = 0.51$) in comparison to those in the control condition ($M = 3.11, SD = 0.55$; $F(1, 179) = 3.67, p = 0.057$). None of the affect items proved to be significantly different across self-threat conditions. Only one participant reported buying either brand of hot chocolate. Self-threat did not interact with gender to predict product choice, nor did self-restoration interact with gender; therefore, the analyses were collapsed across participant gender.

The key prediction was that exposing participants to a self-threat should increase the frequency of FT product choice even though it is of inferior quality. We also predicted that FT choice should be reduced if individuals self-affirm prior to and independently of their choice. Our predictions were supported by our data. A logistic regression revealed a significant self-threat by self-restoration interaction ($\beta = -1.31, \chi^2 = 4.00, p = 0.045$), in addition to a significant main effect of self-threat ($\beta = 1.56, \chi^2 = 11.51, p = 0.001$; see Fig. 3).

To investigate the interaction further, we conducted planned comparisons using logistic regression. Consistent with our predictions, the choice of the FT hot chocolate was higher in the self-threat/no self-restoration condition (65.8%) than in the other three conditions (average choice share = 29.2%; $\beta = 1.53, \chi^2 = 15.57, p < 0.001$). Importantly, the data also revealed that FT choice was higher in the self-threat/no self-restoration condition (65.8%) than the self-threat/self-restoration condition (32.0%; $\beta = 0.68, \chi^2 = 8.55, p = 0.003$).

Study 4

The objective of this experiment was to demonstrate our effect with real behavior and choice. In this “field” study, we measure self-threat as a continuous measure of how happy versus how disappointed university undergrads were after receiving their midterm exams. Negative feedback has been used to generate self-threat in prior research (e.g., Park and Crocker 2008; Steele et al. 1993). We also included a control condition in which an ethical choice was not present among the products to be chosen.

Method

Participants

Eighty-four students (48 women) in an undergraduate marketing course voluntarily participated in this experiment. We

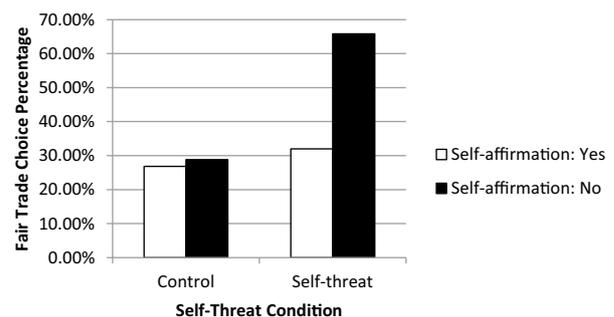


Fig. 3 Percentage of people choosing the Fairtrade option—Study 3

employed a two-condition between-subject design (ethical choice: present in choice options versus not present in choice options) with a continuous measure of self-threat.

Design and Procedure

Students completed a midterm exam 10 days prior to receiving their results. Midterm exams were handed back to students in the classroom, and students were given 15 min to review their exams. Participants then responded to a single item asking them, “Compared to what you expected, how do you feel about your midterm grade?” (1 = very happy; 5 = very disappointed). Participants were then asked to choose between an individually wrapped chocolate (4.5 g) or one dollar. (These options were pretested with another sample of students from the same population to ensure that students did not have a preference for one over the other.) For the students in the ethical choice present condition, the research assistant described the chocolate as “organic, Fairtrade 55% dark chocolate.” In the control condition, the research assistant described the chocolate as “55% dark chocolate.” After making the choice, participants were given the chocolate or one dollar. The course instructor followed up a week later and asked the students what they believed the purpose of the experiment was. None of the students were able to guess the hypotheses. The instructor debriefed them and thanked them again for their participation.

Results

A regression analysis was run with the ethical choice condition, the self-threat measure, and their interaction term as predictors. The choice between chocolate (coded as 1) and \$1 (coded as 0) served as the dependent variable. Results revealed a marginally significant effect of the ethical choice condition ($\beta = -1.60$, $Z = -1.78$, $p = 0.07$) and a significant interaction between ethical choice condition and self-threat ($\beta = 0.50$, $Z = 2.01$, $p < 0.05$, see Fig. 4). This interaction was analyzed using the Johnson–Neyman technique to show the ranges of self-threat where the effect of ethical condition (i.e., the difference between choosing the chocolate differed between ethical conditions) is significant and where it is not (Hayes and Matthes 2009; Johnson and Neyman 1936). The mean self-threat value was 3.61 (SD = 1.05). The Johnson–Neyman point where the probability of choosing the chocolate over the dollar is significantly different is at self-threat values of 4.27 ($Z = 1.96$, $p = 0.05$) or greater. There are no significant differences in students’ choices at values lower than 4.27. Stated differently, students’ choice of the chocolate (over \$1) in the ethical choice condition was significantly more than students’ choice of the chocolate in the

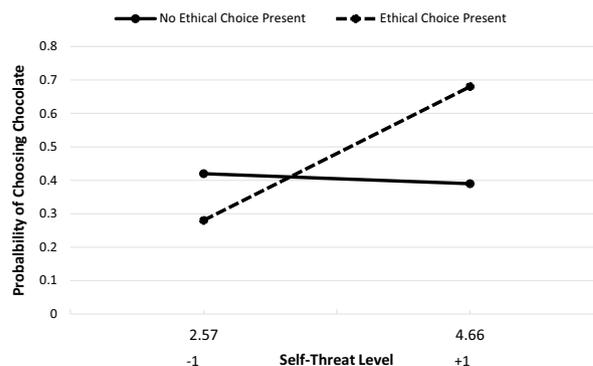


Fig. 4 Probability of choosing chocolate when ethical choice is present or absent—Study 4. Johnson–Neyman region of significance at values greater than 4.27

control condition when self-threat was greater than 4.27, or 0.62 standard deviations above the mean.

Discussion

Our results demonstrate the self-restorative function of ethical consumption. We show that when faced with a threat to their self-esteem, consumers are more likely to choose an ethical product over an economically superior (e.g., larger quantity or higher quality) competitor. We also demonstrate the driving role of self-restoration in such choice.

These findings make three contributions to theories of ethical consumption and self-affirmation. While most research on ethical consumption implicates prosocial motives, such as altruism or values-driven choice (e.g., Kozinets and Handelman 2004; De Groot and Steg 2009; Smith 1990; Trudel and Cotte 2009), we demonstrate that such behavior can be a response to consumers’ fundamental need to feel better about themselves after their self-esteem has been threatened. At the same time, our research provides a potential explanation for why people often say they are likely to support ethical products but do not actually do so when it comes to purchase (Auger et al. 2003, 2007, 2008): people have many ways of enhancing their self-esteem at any given time (e.g., Sherman and Cohen 2006; Sherman et al. 2009). Our research demonstrates that when consumers have the opportunity, independent of ethical choice, to self-restore after a self-threat, ethical products are, subsequently, less likely to be chosen. In other words, while the purchase of an ethical product offers one avenue for self-restoration, other options exist, thereby reducing the likelihood of an ethical choice. While there are likely to be many factors that account for the gap between intentions and choice, the level of motivation for self-restoration appears to play an important role. In this respect, ethical consumption decisions are not driven purely by altruistic motives—they are more of a

balance between “caring for the self, for community and for nature,” or what Sheth and colleagues (2011) call “mindful consumption.”

Limitations

We endeavored to increase the generalizability of our studies through the use of different sample sources, self-threat manipulations, self-restoration techniques, and products. We recognize that there is a tradeoff between generalizability and the ability to compare findings across studies. The later can be made more difficult by varying procedures from one study to another. We also acknowledge that student samples were used in three of our studies, and that while sample sizes were adequate, larger samples would have been preferable. Finally, future research should examine our findings in other naturalistic settings and investigate the extent to which they generalize across cultures.

Managerial Implications

Marketing managers must often decide how much to invest in the ethicality of a product. Our results suggest that an important consideration is to determine how ethical a product needs to be to represent a self-restorative option. Trudel and Cotte (2009) found that consumers were willing to pay a premium for an ethical product (and want to pay significantly less than normal for an unethical product), but increasing degrees of positive ethicality (cotton that was 25%, 50%, or 100% organic) did not lead to higher willingness to pay. These results, combined with the self-restoration findings of the present research, imply that perhaps even small degrees of positive ethicality will allow the consumer to self-signal virtue. This suggests that marketers can obtain a higher return on investment by bringing all products in their portfolio into the positive end of the ethics scale, rather than investing in extremely high ethicality for only some products.

Our findings point to an important new focus in the way ethical products might be marketed. Today, most ethical products are positioned as benefiting the larger good, or some specific aspect thereof, such as the environment, disadvantaged groups or communities (e.g., inner-city children or the disabled), or members of the value chain that have traditionally been treated unfairly (e.g., coffee farmers in developing countries). For example, the Fairtrade Labeling Organization, the certification body for the Fairtrade movement, focuses on the benefits to producers in its communications, as do many of its clients, the brands that license the Fairtrade logo. But as Falk and Szech (2013) show, third-party welfare may not inherently loom large in buyers’ marketplace decisions, or at least is subject to tradeoffs against personal gain. A

similar tradeoff, a willingness to endorse sweatshop labor for personally preferred products (Paharia et al. 2013), and a willful forgetting of uncomfortable ethical information in order to protect the self, have also been demonstrated (Reczek et al. 2018).

The most basic implication of our research is that the benefit to consumers from ethical products is not only prosocial but also pro-self. Marketers may find their ethical appeals to be more effective if they are made to consumer segments that are motivated to feel better about themselves, or in contexts where these needs may be more prominent. For example, ethical products could be sold in categories where consumption itself might be self-threatening, such as extravagant or environmentally unfriendly purchases. To the extent that ethical products can allow self-restoration, providing such products in contexts where self-esteem is potentially under threat might help consumers to feel good by doing good.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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