



Derleme Makale • Review Article

An Overview of Moral Disengagement in Consumer Studies

Tüketici Çalışmalarında Ahlaki Çözölmeye Genel Bir Bakış

Enis Yakut ^{a,*}

^aDr. Öğr. Üyesi, Manisa Celal Bayar Üniversitesi, İşletme Fakültesi, Uluslararası Lojistik Bölümü, 45140, Manisa/Türkiye.
ORCID: 0000-0002-7201-7827

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 06 March 2021

Received in revised form 22 March 2021

Accepted 28 March 2021

Keywords:

Moral Disengagement

Consumer Psychology

Unethical Behavior

MAKALE BİLGİSİ

Makale Geçmişi:

Başvuru tarihi: 06 Mart 2021

Düzeltilme tarihi: 22 Mart 2021

Kabul tarihi: 28 Mart 2021

Anahtar Kelimeler:

Ahlaki Çözölmeye

Tüketici Psikolojisi

Etik olmayan davranış

ABSTRACT

Moral Disengagement is a collection of socio-cognitive mechanisms by which individuals detach themselves from ethical actions and participate in inhumane, abusive, damaging, or horrifying acts toward others without showing remorse and self-censure. Previous studies revealed the significant role of moral disengagement between individuals' moral standards and their unethical actions. Moral disengagement mechanisms allow people to perform unethical behaviors they normally do not approve or are against their moral standards, however consumer perspective in previous studies are either omitted or quite limited. Therefore, in this study, a general outlook to consumer behavior studies is presented to understand the role of moral disengagement in varying contexts. A general discussion and future research avenues are also presented at the end.

ÖZ

Ahlaki çözölmeye (ahlaki uzaklaşma/ahlaki kayıtsızlık/ahlaki geri çekilme), bireylerin kendilerini etik eylemlerden ayırdıkları ve pişmanlık ve öz-kınama göstermeden başkalarına karşı insanlık dışı, taciz edici, zarar verici veya dehşet verici eylemlere katıldıkları bir sosyo-bilişsel mekanizmalar bütünüdür. Önceki çalışmalar, bireylerin ahlaki standartları ile etik olmayan eylemleri arasındaki ahlaki çözölmeye önemli bir rolü olduğunu ortaya çıkarmıştır. Ahlaki çözölmeye mekanizmaları, insanların normalde onaylamadıkları veya ahlaki standartlarına aykırı olan etik olmayan davranışları gerçekleştirmelerine izin verir, ancak önceki çalışmalarda tüketici perspektifi ya ihmal edilmiş ya da oldukça sınırlı kalmıştır. Bu nedenle bu çalışmada, farklı durumlarda ahlaki çözölmeye rolünü anlamak için tüketici davranış çalışmaları genel bir bakış sunulmuştur. Çalışmanın sonunda genel bir tartışma ve gelecekteki araştırmalar için de tavsiyeler sunulmuştur.

1. Introduction

There is not a day that goes by where we do not face unbearable stories about unethical behavior in news outlets. Specifically, with the emergence of social media, unethical and dishonest actions became more prone to circulate, which force us to question how we – human beings – turn into so immoral creatures. Or simply put, were we always like that since the beginning of existence?

Naturally the reasons behind the unethical behaviors intrigued the researchers who offered different explanations

in order to interpret this process (Detert et al., 2008: 374). One of the explanations for this act is Moral Disengagement (Bandura, 1999) which is a collection of socio-cognitive mechanisms by which individuals detach themselves from ethical actions and participate in inhumane, abusive, damaging, or horrifying acts toward others without showing remorse and self-censure (Thornberg & Jungert, 2013: 476). In a simpler explanation, moral disengagement is a person's way of rationalizing the abandonment of moral principles in a certain situation (Wang et al., 2019: 209).

* Sorumlu yazar/Corresponding author
e-posta: enis.yakut@cbu.edu.tr

Previous studies revealed the varying significant roles of moral disengagement between individuals' moral standards and their unethical actions (Shu, et al., 2011: 330). From a consumer behavior perspective, dishonest behavior may take several forms such as digital piracy, shoplifting, remain unresponsive after receiving too much change (Mitchell et al., 2008: 395). According to Bandura (1986), moral disengagement mechanisms allow people to perform unethical behavior they normally do not approve or are against their moral standards; and this proposition is evaluated in many studies in order to understand consumers' immoral attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, in this study, a general outlook to consumer behavior studies is presented to understand the role of moral disengagement in varying contexts. A general discussion and future research avenues are also presented at the end.

2. Moral Disengagement

According to agentic view of Social Cognitive Theory, individuals exert power of their own thoughts and actions through self-regulatory mechanisms (Bandura, 1986). Most individuals, according to the theory, have established personal moral values that act as a self-regulatory mechanism. Individuals use their personal standards to predict, track, and judge their own conduct, so they encourage positive behaviors and discourage inappropriate ones. This self-regulatory mechanism is only active when it is turned on. According to Bandura (1999: 194), individuals may choose to deactivate this self-regulatory mechanism, which he calls moral disengagement. The processes of moral disengagement decouple our internal expectations/standards from the way we perceive our actions and make them justifiable (Moore, 2015: 199). There are eight correlated cognitive moral disengagement processes that allow individuals to act immorally while being undisturbed by their self-monitoring moral norms: *"moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregarding or distorting the consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame"* (Bandura, 1986: 376).

As an example, imagine a student whose moral values prohibits him/her from stealing, but has downloaded a book illegally from an online database without paying for it. According to eight moral disengagement mechanisms, that student justifies this unethical action with the following explanations (Moore, 2015: 199; Thatcher & Matthews, 2012): downloading the book is not that important since the publisher is selling millions of books every year (*distortion of consequences*), other students also download books all the time (*diffusion of responsibility*), downloading that book is a small violation compared to stealing from a bookstore (*advantageous comparison*), even teachers download books illegally, so he/she should too (*displacement of responsibility*), the book is priced for high-income citizens, therefore as a low-income person it is justifiable to download the book (*moral justification*), downloading the book is similar to 'borrowing' it (*euphemistic labeling*), the publisher is a big, greedy, evil corporation that doesn't do any good to the public (*dehumanization*), people are able to download the book because company did not take necessary measures to protect its copyrights (*attribution of blame*). As a result, that student uses one (or more) of these mechanisms

for not contradicting with his/her moral standards about stealing and downloads the book with complacency.

3. Moral Disengagement in Consumer Studies

The immoral behaviors of consumers are known to cost around \$914 million in UK in 2018 (Seidler, 2019). US National Retail Federation report also shows that, cost of theft, fraud and losses from other retail shrinkage was about \$61.7 billion in 2019 (NRF, 2020). Even though many consumers have some moral standards, they may engage in unethical attitudes and behavior through moral disengagement strategies. (Egan et al, 2015: 123). Normally a petty theft may be unacceptable and against a consumer's ethical values, and this inconsistency is expected to create cognitive dissonance (Gregory-Smith et al., 2013: 1202). Moral disengagement strategies play a pivotal role in this process where they help consumers to dissolve this tension and relieve them from the feeling of guilt and discomfort. Moreover, moral disengagement is stated to be a crucial psychological phenomenon that encourages workers to pilferage without feeling any remorse (Harris & He, 2019: 58). Even though moral disengagement has been investigated in different contexts, consumer perspective in those studies are omitted or quite limited (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014: 678). The application of moral disengagement in several consumer studies is presented below.

3.1 Word-of-mouth (WOM) and Moral Disengagement

Consumer's word-of-mouth (WOM) and e-WOM behavior may deviate from the ethical standards in the form of exaggeration, lying and misleading. After a negative experience, a consumer (specifically one with high dark personality traits : psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism) may write an online review about his/her experience and intentionally deceive the readers, where by using moral disengagement strategies he/she persuades him/herself that moral principles are not applicable (Kapoor et al., 2021: 2).

Consumers' negative WOM (vindictive or support seeking) after they experience service failures is quite common. The nature of vindictive WOM (i.e. seeking reciprocation) makes the moral identity of the consumers more important, since their reaction will be shaped in accordance with their moral judgements (He & Harris, 2014: 133). Similar to above mentioned moral disengagement scenario, if the victim of an unpleasant service failure engages in a vindictive negative WOM, he/she will most likely compare his/her actions (advantageous comparison) with the damage induced by the hotel's service failure, and conclude that the negative WOM is harmless (compared to hotel's failure). The importance of moral identity is also accentuated in consumers' moral disengagement processes, where high moral identity is found to generate less moral disengagement. However, as the severity of the failure increases, even consumers with high moral identity may engage in vindictive behavior (He & Harris, 2014: 146)

3.2 Sustainable Consumption and Moral Disengagement

Sustainable consumption is an important research avenue that attracts the attention of numerous researchers, profit and

non-profit organizations and governments, which all aim to identify means to support environmentally friendly attitudes and behaviors. However, the prevalent and confusing inconsistency between consumers' reported pro-environmental attitudes and their substantial behavior is a major point of concern which restrain all stakeholders to evoke more sustainable consumption (Kilian and Mann, 2020: 120). One of the reasons for this discrepancy between the attitudes and behaviors is cognitive defense mechanisms (i.e. moral disengagement) which disrupt the transformation of pro-environmental attitudes into behaviors. Basically, through moral disengagement, consumers use adaptive reasoning processes to satisfy the personal interests (i.e. purchasing an unsustainable product) instead of doing "the right thing" (i.e. purchasing an eco-friendly product), which eventually create the attitude-action gap (Kilian and Mann, 2020: 126).

Studies show that, certain characteristics of the consumers are related with their ethical considerations. Specifically, consumers' empathy, moral identity and cynicism is found to be related with varying dimensions of consumer ethics, moreover moral disengagement may act as a mediator in this relationship (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014: 678). Ethical and moral issues are also important determinants of green and sustainable purchase decisions since some consumers consider the rightfulness/wrongfulness of the particular purchase with regards to its environmental and societal consequences. In case of experiencing a conflict during their unsustainable or non-green behavior, consumers use moral disengagement to deter from their moral standards, which will eventually decrease the tension and soothe the cognitive dissonance (Sharma & Lal, 2020: 218).

Effect of moral disengagement on energy consumers in their preferences for renewable energy sources is also accentuated. Specifically, when consumers attribute the responsibility of protecting the environment to the authorities, they are least likely to pay more for green energy (displacement of responsibility) (Venugopal & Shukla, 2019: 61). Therefore, it is fair to state that through moral disengagement, consumers will resolve their internal moral conflicts, and may continue to hold a positive view of themselves which will help them to attain self-exoneration.

Additionally, moral disengagement processes are also found to be efficacious when consumers encounter cruel practices against animals in fashion industry. Consumers find a way to justify their unethical consumption through moral disengagement strategies, and the indirect effect of their perceived animal cruelty on intention to support non-profit organizational campaign is moderated by their moral justification (Lim et al., 2019: 638). The food habits of the consumers were also under investigation with an ethical perspective, where psychological factors and moral disengagement strategies are found to be related with consumers' evaluation of their own dietary habits (Graça et al., 2014: 753). Similarly, moral disengagement strategies encourage people to follow and sustain self-serving negative practices (food habits), even though they are against their ethical values, and at the same time they can keep fighting for those principles without feeling guilt and remorse (Bandura, 1999: 194).

As we know, there are strong advocates of vegetarianism, and they base their arguments on the premise that animals

are capable of experiencing pain and suffering, and therefore they deserve the same rights and moral value as humans (Ang et al., 2019: 81). Interestingly, studies show a significant moral disengagement differences between the meat eaters and non-meat eaters. Moreover, one group (meat eaters) believe that animals that humans consume (AHC) only have primary emotions, and contrary the others (non-meat eaters) assign more mental capacity to AHC (Bastian et al., 2012: 248). It is possible that in order to minimize the negative affective feelings associated with meat eating, meat-eaters (the ones who have ethical considerations about meat consumption) may sustain their meat-eating habits through moral disengagement, by reassuring themselves that moral values should not extend to them (Ang et al., 2019: 84). Basically, consumers who eat meat tended to overcome the moral inconsistency by reverting to pro-meat justifications and self-exonerations. As a result, this tactic will make them seem less unethical. Overall, moral disengagement establishes conditions that allow current meat consumption to continue even among people who care about animal cruelty, the environment, and/or public health (Graça et al., 2015: 88). In a similar vein, strategies that oppose moral disengagement are more likely to increase consumers' willingness to change their dietary habits (Buttlar et al., 2021: 64).

Therefore, it is fair to conclude that moral disengagement is a crucial factor that may enable consumers to preserve the non-green and anti-environmental behavior.

3.3 Ethical Consumption and Moral Disengagement

Moral Disengagement processes were investigated with an ethical consumption perspective since there are many consumption activities that require ethical consideration. Considering the fact that piracy costs for books are about \$315 million and for e-books are about \$300 million, number of lost jobs is between 230,000 and 560,000 in USA as a result of digital video piracy, software piracy was about \$46.3 billion between 2015 and 2017, annual loss in the movie industry is about \$40 and \$97.1 billion (Vuleta, 2021; Letić, 2019), it imperative to understand the psychological processes behind this unethical consumption activity.

Normally, an individual's moral obligations should restrain him/herself from illegal activities such as piracy. Euphemistic labeling is one of prevalent the moral disengagement techniques used by the media in the portrayal of the most sensitive news, and such neutralizing expressions also can lower public moral interest and attention (Bandura, 2002: 104). When used in measuring the intention to pirate, this strategy is also found to be a significant factor in predicting piracy (Olivero et al., 2019: 1286). Therefore, it can be concluded that when individuals participate in piracy, they are more likely to disengage from their ethical values by justifications in order to diminish remorse.

One important area of research that investigate and incorporate moral disengagement is counterfeit luxury consumption, where consumers find purchasing those items as morally unacceptable (Hoe et al., 2003: 62), however they continue to buy those items. Researchers tried to explain this contradiction between the values and behaviors from different perspectives. Like other unethical consumption practices, moral disengagement helps to understand this inconsistency (Chen et al., 2018: 260). Interestingly and

contrary to other purchase experiences, moral disengagement processes continue to be active after the purchase of counterfeit items since it is always on display in public (Wang et al., 2019: 207). If other people think that the item is original, this will relieve the consumer, he/she will continue to employ moral disengagement strategies and purchase counterfeit items. However, when others are suspicious about the authenticity of the item, it may create social anxiety in the person, which will lead to decreased moral disengagement and less immoral actions (Wang et al., 2019: 221). It should be noted that as the number of unethical practices in a certain environment become more common, the number of people who are tolerant toward them will also increase. Consequently, there will be increased number of individuals who are morally disengaged, and the simpler it will be for them to justify moral dilemmas, and the more likely they will create favorable reactions to counterfeit and pirated goods (Eisend, 2019: 312).

Moral disengagement is used in understanding the unethical behavior of athletes. The use of performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs) by athletes for the purpose of improving their performance is immoral because they are both prohibited and give them an unfair advantage over their opponents (Mazzeo et al., 2018: 107). However, there are many cases of well-known athletes using these drugs while being well aware of the immorality of PED consumption. By using varying moral disengagement strategies, athletes may justify their PED usage, which consequently contributes to a higher recorded PED consumption (Hodge et al., 2013: 421). Since immoral actions can be successfully prevented by using moral codes and social contracts, preventive strategies against PED usage can also be implemented by using similar tactics.

3.4 Moral Disengagement and Celebrity Endorsement

Transgressions of celebrities such as affairs, improper jokes, verbal and physical assaults, drug and alcohol addiction, doping scandals are quite common, and known to affect consumer perceptions toward both celebrities and their affiliated brands. Notably, when making evaluative decisions, people appear to value negative information more than positive information (Wang & Kim, 2020: 115). Ironically in some cases, consumers tend to ignore the wrongdoing of the celebrities and continue to show support, which accentuates the importance of cognitive processes such as moral disengagement in the celebrity-fan relationship. Specifically, as the consumers' levels of identification with the celebrity increase, they are more likely to activate moral disengagement strategies in order to relieve themselves from the contradicting information between the celebrities' wrongdoing and their positive celebrity image (Lee et al., 2016: 186). As a result, they omit the wrongdoing and continue to evaluate both celebrity and brand favorably. Some well-known companies' persistence and perseverance to celebrities after scandals and transgressions by focusing on his/her achievements is a good example of companies' efforts for separating the performance from the wrongdoing in order to activate the moral disengagement process (Wang & Kim, 2020: 120). On the other hand, depending on the moral reasoning strategy (moral coupling, moral decoupling and moral rationalization), consumer evaluations about the wrongdoer may vary, however how those strategies affect the

relationship between the transgressor and the endorsed brand is still unclear (Lee and Kwak, 2016: 109).

3.5 Moral Disengagement and Online Environments

Another interesting area of research is critiquing and cyberbullying toward the celebrities. Previous research revealed that, people participate in critiquing and cyberbullying actions (which they normally wouldn't direct to people they personally know), and justify those actions by using various moral disengagement strategies such as "cognitive restructuring, obscuring or minimizing their own role in causing harm, disregarding or distorting the impact of harmful, and blaming and dehumanizing the victim" (Ouvrein et al., 2017: 472). The reason for engaging in cyberbullying toward celebrities might be the higher perceived distance toward a celebrity compared to a peer, therefore this feeling may create the feeling of safe distance and less possibility of backfire (Ouvrein, De Backer, & Vandebosch, 2018: 62).

Extensive body of research investigated bullying and cyberbullying in moral disengagement context (Pozzoli et al., 2012: 379). Studies reveal significant relationship between bullying and moral disengagement, where bullies have higher and non-bullies have lower levels of moral disengagement, independent of how often they have been bullied (Hymel et al., 2005: 8). There are many factors that may induce bullying, however elements such as the paucity of social-emotional cues, the ease of disseminating communication via social networks, and the media attention on cyberbullying induce moral disengagement and consequently cyberbullying in online context (Runions & Bak, 2015: 400). Moreover, moderation role of moral disengagement is also present between social media attachment and cyberbullying victimization relationship among university students. Psychological strategies against moral disengagement might be helpful to diminish the negative consequences of social media attachment, cyberbullying and psychological disorders (Cao et al., 2019: 1100).

Computer games present a highly permissive environment where players undertake activities (i.e. missions) that in real life they will never do. Those activities come in the form of drug dealing, arms trade, assault, murder, and they are usually against the players' moral values. However, people with high level of moral disengagement may find these actions acceptable, and interestingly those perception may affect the real-world behaviors. Specifically, the effects of those violent games may spill over to real world, and consequently moral disengagement may interact with consumers' lack of self-control, aggression, and cheating (Gabbadini et al., 2014:455). Consumers also show similar behavioral patterns after they see the immoral actions of good TV characters and they are able to ignore those evil behaviors through moral disengagement mechanisms (Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel, 2013: 180)

3.5 Tourism Consumers and Moral Disengagement

Moral disengagement is found to be related to the transgressions of tourists in some contexts, namely during their visits to places as a part of "dark tourism". Dark tourism is known as travels to destinations or attractions that are entirely or partly inspired by an urge for real or symbolic experiences with death (Stone & Sharpley, 2008: 578).

Those places require tourists to be respectful during their visits, however transgressions (i.e. photo taking, laughing) are also quite common. Investigating the reasons behind the unethical or deviant behaviors of the tourist revealed that by using moral disengagement processes, visitors at dark tourism locations justified their transgressive actions (Sharma, 2020: 291-292). As a result, they didn't feel any responsibility about their improper behaviors (Please see Table 1 for investigated studies).

Table 1. Summary of Moral Disengagement Applications in Consumer Studies

Author	Method & Sample	Role of Moral Disengagement	Variables	Conclusion
Hodge et al., 2013	1 study: A survey on 224 athletes	Mediator	An autonomy-supportive climate (IV) Autonomous motivation (mediator) Controlled motivation (mediator) Moral disengagement (mediator) Attitudes toward using PEDs (DV) PED susceptibility (DV)	Moral disengagement is a predictor of positive attitude toward Performance Enhancing Drugs (PEDs), and attitude is a strong predictor of PEDs susceptibility.
Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel, 2013	1 study: An online experiment on 123 students	Mediator	Motivation (DV) Outcome (DV) Moral disengagement (mediator) Positive Attributes (DV) Negative Attributes (DV) Character Liking (DV)	Altruistic motivations and positive outcomes led to more favorable perceptions of a character's attributes, greater character liking, and more justification of the character's action. Moral disengagement mediated the effects of motivation and outcome on perceptions of characters.
Chowdhury and Fernando, 2014	1 study: Questionnaire on 600 consumers (panel data)	Mediation	Empathy (IV) Moral Identity (IV) Cynicism (IV) Consumer Ethics (DV)	Empathy, moral identity and cynicism were related to different dimensions of consumer ethics. Moral disengagement mediated these relationships.
He and Harris, 2014	2 studies: A survey-based experiment 125 consumers A survey-based experiment on 198 consumers	Dependent Variable	Vindictive vs. support-seeking negative WOM (IV) Direct vs. indirect hotel responsibility (IV) Moral identity (IV) Moral awareness (Moderator) Anger (Moderator) Moral Disengagement (DV)	People with higher moral identity centrality are less prone to moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM. Higher anger toward the service failure, and lower moral awareness generate moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM.
Gabbiadini et al., 2014	1 study: A lab experiment on 172 participants	Moderator	Violent video games (IV) Moral disengagement (moderator) Lack of self-control (DV) Aggression (DV) Cheating (DV)	Violent video games decreased self-control and increased cheating and aggression, especially for people high in moral disengagement.
Graça et al., 2014	1 study: 6 semi-structured focus groups on 40 participants			Moral disengagement may play a role in hindering openness to change food habits for the benefit of the environment, public health, and animals.
Graça et al., 2015	3 studies: A set of open-ended questions on 410 participants A survey on 1016 participants A survey on 318 participants	Mediator	Meat consumption (IV) Meat attachment (mediator) Meat substitution (DV)	Proposed measure of moral disengagement is valid and reliable. Individuals with higher levels of moral disengagement to meat consumption and substitution tended to display higher general propensity to morally disengage and to attribute less importance to moral traits.
Lee et al., 2016	1 study: A survey on 297 participants	Dependent Variable	Fan identification (IV) Negative moral emotions (DV/mediator) Moral disengagement (DV) Attitude toward the athlete (DV) Attitude toward the brand (DV)	Fan identification decreases negative moral emotions and causes fans' moral disengagement processes, which enables fans to support the wrongdoer.
Lee and Kwak, 2016	3 studies: An online experiment on 97 participants An online experiment on 57 participants	Independent Variable Dependent Variable	Moral disengagement (IV) Transgression type (IV) Personal involvement with sport (moderator) Perceptions of the athlete's performance (DV)	Moral disengagement strategies are useful in explaining consumers' evaluation of the transgressor.

Author	Method & Sample	Role of Moral Disengagement	Variables	Conclusion
Chen et al., 2018	An online experiment on 237 participants 1 study: A survey on 334 consumers	Mediator	Evaluations of transgressors (DV) Evaluations of endorsed brands (DV) Moral recognition (IV) Moral disengagement (mediator) Moral judgment (mediator) Perceived benefit (mediator) Purchase Intention (DV)	Transgression type has a significant impact on consumers' choice of moral reasoning strategy. Consumers' use (one of) two types of moral reasoning strategies (moral rationalization and moral decoupling) to purchase counterfeit luxuries respectively through moral judgment and perceived benefit.
Ouvrein et al., 2018	1 study: A survey on 1255 adolescents	Mediator	Affective empathy (IV) Cognitive empathy (IV) Moral disengagement (mediator) Online celebrity aggression (DV)	Moral disengagement was related with mild and severe online celebrity aggression and mediated the relationship between affective empathy and both mild and severe celebrity aggression.
Venugopal and Shukla, 2019	1 study: A survey on 140 consumers	Independent Variable	Freedom from financial obligation (moderator) Consumers' sense of ownership (moderator) Willingness to pay more (DV)	Consumers' moral disengagement with environmental concerns negatively influences their willingness to pay more for renewable energy.
Lim et al., 2019	1 study: A survey-based experiment 82 undergraduate students	Moderator	Perceived animal cruelty (IV) Negative arousal (mediator) Supportive behavior intention (DV) Ethical consumption intention (DV)	Negative emotional arousal is positively related to perceived animal cruelty. Moral disengagement moderated the effect of perceived animal cruelty on supportive behavior intention.
Ang et al., 2019	1 study: A survey-based experiment 130 consumers	Dependent Variable	Slaughtered animal (pet vs. AHC) (IV) Meat eaters vs. non-meat eaters (DV) Mind attribution (DV) Moral disengagement (DV)	Meat eaters had higher levels of moral disengagement in comparison to non-meat eaters. There is a higher moral disengagement among meat eaters who tend to view AHCs as lacking in mental capacities.
Olivero et al., 2019	1 study: A questionnaire 396 participants	Mediator	Past piracy behavior (IV) Perceived behavioral control (mediator) Subjective norms (mediator) Positive attitude (mediator) Moral obligation (mediator) Moral disengagement (mediator) Intention to pirate (DV)	Moral disengagement (<i>euphemistic labelling</i>) plays a significant role in predicting piracy.
Harris and He, 2019	2 studies: 47 in-depth interviews A questionnaire 381 participants	Mediation	Cynicism (IV) Moral identity centrality (IV) Social Norms (IV) Ethical Leadership (IV) Pilferage (DV)	Moral identity centrality and ethical leadership inhibit pilferage moral disengagement, cynicism and pilferage norms enhance it.
Wang et al., 2019	5 studies: A lab experiment on 79 female students A lab experiment on 109 female students An online experiment on 331 females A lab experiment on 88 female students An online experiment on 114 females	Mediator Dependent Variable	Authenticity signal (IV) Social Anxiety (mediator) Moral disengagement (mediator) Moral disengagement (DV) Purchase intention (DV)	Low authenticity signals cause social anxiety, high social anxiety result in decreases in moral disengagement regarding counterfeit purchases. The end result is low authenticity signals lead to lower purchase intentions.
Eisend, 2019	1 study: A meta-analysis on 196 studies	Mediator	Morality (IV) Moral disengagement (mediator) Institutional and social context (moderator) Attitude (DV/Mediator) Intention (DV/Mediator) Behavior (DV)	The institutional and social context of consumers explains the differences in morality effects on justifications and responses to counterfeit and pirated products.

Author	Method & Sample	Role of Moral Disengagement	Variables	Conclusion
Cao et al., 2019	1 study: A survey on 305 college students	Moderator	Social media attachment (SMA) (IV) Moral disengagement (moderator) Cyberbullying victimization (CV) (DV) Depression (DV) Anxiety (DV) Social Media Fatigue (DV)	SMA is related to CV. CV and internalizing disorders were positively related to social media fatigue. Moral disengagement moderated the relationship between SMA and CV.
Sharma and Lal, 2020	1 study: Semi-structured interviews with 20 consumers	Mediation	Morality (DV) Green Purchasing Intention (mediator) Inefficacy (mediator) Non-green buying behavior (mediator) Self-exoneration (DV)	Consumers navigate and negotiate morality with self-constructural thoughts to rationalize their judgements. When intentions fail to translate into green buying behavior consumers attempt to achieve self-exoneration.
Kilian and Mann, 2020	1 study: Online experiment with 306 participants	Mediation	Possibility for moral disengagement (IV) Reduction of moral feelings (mediator) Purchase intention for option with poor socio-ecological performance (DV) WOM intention for option with poor socio-ecological performance (DV) Willingness to pay for better socio-ecological performance (DV)	Participants engaged in moral disengagement when a presented consumption option with poor socio-ecological performance was perceived as desirable and when a moral disengagement cue was available.
Sharma, 2020	A multi-method approach (qualitative data, secondary data, semi-structured interviews, observation and blogs, forums and websites)			Various moral disengagement strategies cause tourists show morally transgressive behaviors in dark tourism sites.
Wang and Kim, 2020	1 study: An online experiment on 144 participants	Mediator	Transgression severity (IV) Moral disengagement (mediator) Fan identification (moderator) Attitudes toward the celebrity (DV) Attitudes toward the endorsed brand (DV) Purchase intention (DV)	Modal disengagement strategies mediate the effects of highly negative information about a celebrity on consumer attitudes toward the celebrity and endorsed brand as well as on purchase intention.
Kapoor et al., 2021	4 studies: A survey on 202 consumers A survey 138 consumers A survey 139 consumers A survey 145 consumers	Mediation	Narcissism (IV) Machiavellianism (IV) Psychopathy (IV) Intention to exaggerate in online reviews (DV)	A positive relationship between dark personality traits and intention to exaggerate in online reviews was found. Moral disengagement significantly mediated intention to exaggerate for narcissists and psychopaths.

4. Discussion and Directions for Future Research

Many people have some level of moral values, try to be righteous and consider the consequences of their actions. Consumer behavior is guided by morality in part due to the socio-cultural consequences of consumption choices (Kilian and Mann, 2020: 121). However, in some cases consumers deviate from their moral values and act against the social expectations. Bandura (2002: 102) states that “Morality is rooted in a self-reactive selfhood, rather than in dispassionate abstract reasoning” and suggests that self-regulation processes that guide the behavior need to be activated in order to regulate the behavior. Basically, individuals may

know what is ethical and what is not, however they can activate/deactivate the self-regulation that guide their behavior through moral disengagement strategies. After investigating the consumer studies in marketing domain, we see that moral disengagement is used to understand variety of unethical consumer activities, which is in line with the perspective that “one’s context can influence one’s tendency to morally disengage” (Moore, 2015: 200).

Even though moral disengagement was investigated with diverse perspective, number of studies in consumer behavior is quite limited (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014: 678). Therefore, in order to create a path for consumer researchers in order to better understand this phenomenon and

consumers' unethical behaviors, following research suggestions are presented.

Investigating the cultural differences of consumers, and how culture affects moral disengagement and immoral acts can present valuable insights for researchers and practitioners. Moral values and principles may vary between the cultures, and as the person values are in accordance with the community, his/her behaviors will also align, and thus be less compelled to morally disengage (Sverdlik, & Rechter, 2020: 3). Therefore, culture can be a significant determinant of moral disengagement tendencies of consumers.

In terms of investigating the service failures, crisis and organizational wrongdoings, using real events may generate a more thorough understanding of the moral disengagement concept, since consumer reactions and moral disengagement mechanism may vary between hypothetical and real life events (He & Harris, 2014: 148). Consumer reactions to different crisis response strategies is accentuated in previous studies (Coombs & Holladay, 2002: 167). In order to better understand the consumer reactions to service failures, interaction of different response strategies with moral disengagement can be examined. Moreover, using experimental studies would be more effective in order to understand cause and effect in different research contexts.

Even though there are studies that investigated the sustainable consumption and green behavior with a moral disengagement perspective, there is still a big gap in that research field. Specifically, investigating the different value orientations of consumers may deepen the understanding of pro-environmental behavior, since some studies present a correlation between altruistic values and moral disengagement (Yang et al., 2020: 9). Additionally, more empirical research in order to understand consumers' self-exoneration through moral disengagement in sustainable consumption context is required (Sharma & Lal, 2020: 233).

Lastly, understanding the bystander behavior during different unethical actions of peers, friends and family against lay people, athletes, influencers or celebrities in online environments can be an interesting research avenue.

References

- Ang, C. S., Chan, N. N., & Singh, L. (2019). A comparison study of meat eaters and non-meat eaters on mind attribution and moral disengagement of animals. *Appetite, 136*, 80-85.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bandura, A. (1999). Moral disengagement in the preparation of inhumanities. *Personal and Social Psychology Review, 3*, 193-209.
- Bandura, A. (2002). Selective moral disengagement in the exercise of moral agency. *Journal of Moral Education, 31*(2), 101-119.
- Bastian, B., Loughnan, S., Haslam, N., & Radke, H. R. (2012). Don't mind meat? The denial of mind to animals used for human consumption. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 38*(2), 247-256.
- Buttlar, B., Rothe, A., Kleinert, S., Hahn, L., & Walther, E. (2021). Food for Thought: Investigating Communication Strategies to Counteract Moral Disengagement Regarding Meat Consumption. *Environmental Communication, 15*(1), 55-68.
- Cao, X., Khan, A. N., Zaigham, G. H., & Khan, N. A. (2019). The stimulators of social media fatigue among students: Role of moral disengagement. *Journal of Educational Computing Research, 57*(5), 1083-1107.
- Chen, J., Teng, L., & Liao, Y. (2018). Counterfeit luxuries: does moral reasoning strategy influence consumers' pursuit of counterfeits?. *Journal of Business Ethics, 151*(1), 249-264.
- Chowdhury, R. M., & Fernando, M. (2014). The relationships of empathy, moral identity and cynicism with consumers' ethical beliefs: The mediating role of moral disengagement. *Journal of Business Ethics, 124*(4), 677-694.
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2002). Helping crisis managers protect reputational assets: Initial tests of the situational crisis communication theory. *Management Communication Quarterly, 16*(2), 165-186.
- Detert, J. R., Treviño, L. K., & Sweitzer, V. L. (2008). Moral disengagement in ethical decision making: a study of antecedents and outcomes. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 93*(2), 374.
- Egan, V., Hughes, N., & Palmer, E. J. (2015). Moral disengagement, the dark triad, and unethical consumer attitudes. *Personality and Individual Differences, 76*, 123-128.
- Eisend, M. (2019). Morality effects and consumer responses to counterfeit and pirated products: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Business Ethics, 154*(2), 301-323.
- Gabbiadini, A., Riva, P., Andrighetto, L., Volpato, C., & Bushman, B. J. (2014). Interactive effect of moral disengagement and violent video games on self-control, cheating, and aggression. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 5*(4), 451-458.
- Graça, J., Calheiros, M. M., & Oliveira, A. (2014). Moral disengagement in harmful but cherished food practices? An exploration into the case of meat. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics, 27*(5), 749-765.
- Graça, J., Oliveira, A., & Calheiros, M. M. (2015). Meat, beyond the plate. Data-driven hypotheses for understanding consumer willingness to adopt a more plant-based diet. *Appetite, 90*, 80-90.
- Gregory-Smith, D., Smith, A., & Winklhofer, H. (2013). Emotions and dissonance in 'ethical' consumption choices. *Journal of Marketing Management, 29*(11-12), 1201-1223.

- Harris, L. C., & He, H. (2019). Retail employee pilferage: A study of moral disengagement. *Journal of Business Research, 99*, 57-68.
- He, H., & Harris, L. (2014). Moral disengagement of hotel guest negative WOM: moral identity centrality, moral awareness, and anger. *Annals of Tourism Research, 45*, 132-151.
- Hodge, K., Hargreaves, E. A., Gerrard, D., & Lonsdale, C. (2013). Psychological mechanisms underlying doping attitudes in sport: Motivation and moral disengagement. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 35*(4), 419-432.
- Hoe, L., Hogg, G., & Hart, S. (2003). Fakin'it: Counterfeiting and consumer contradictions. In *European Advances in Consumer Research Volume 6*, eds. Darach Turley and Stephen Brown, Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, 60-67.
- Hymel, S., Rocke-Henderson, N., & Bonanno, R. A. (2005). Moral disengagement: A framework for understanding bullying among adolescents. *Journal of Social Sciences, 8*(1), 1-11.
- Kapoor, P. S., Balaji, M. S., Maity, M., & Jain, N. K. (2021). Why consumers exaggerate in online reviews? Moral disengagement and dark personality traits. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 60*, 102496, 1-13.
- Kilian, S., & Mann, A. (2020). When the damage is done: Effects of moral disengagement on sustainable consumption. *Journal of Organizational Psychology, 20*(1), 120-132.
- Krakowiak, K. M., & Tsay-Vogel, M. (2013). What makes characters' bad behaviors acceptable? The effects of character motivation and outcome on perceptions, character liking, and moral disengagement. *Mass Communication and Society, 16*(2), 179-199.
- Lee, J. S., & Kwak, D. H. (2016). Consumers' responses to public figures' transgression: Moral reasoning strategies and implications for endorsed brands. *Journal of Business Ethics, 137*(1), 101-113.
- Lee, J. S., Kwak, D. H., & Braunstein-Minkove, J. R. (2016). Coping with athlete endorsers' immoral behavior: Roles of athlete identification and moral emotions on moral reasoning strategies. *Journal of Sport Management, 30*(2), 176-191.
- Letić, J. (2019). Piracy statistics for 2020 – People would still download a car. <https://dataprot.net/statistics/piracy-statistics/>
- Lim, H., Cho, M., & Bedford, S. C. (2019). You Shall (Not) Fear: The effects of emotional stimuli in social media campaigns and moral disengagement on apparel consumers' behavioral engagement. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal, 23*(4), 628-644.
- Mazzeo, F., D'elia, F., & Raiola, G. (2018). Drugs in sport: Doping development and ethical analysis. *Sport Science, 11*(1), 106-112.
- Mitchell, V. W., Balabanis, G., Schlegelmilch, B. B., & Cornwell, T. B. (2009). Measuring unethical consumer behavior across four countries. *Journal of Business Ethics, 88*(2), 395-412.
- Moore, C. (2015). Moral disengagement. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 6*, 199-204.
- NRF (2020). Retail shrink totaled \$61.7 billion in 2019 amid rising employee theft and shoplifting/ORC. <https://nrf.com/media-center/press-releases/retail-shrink-totaled-617-billion-2019-amid-rising-employee-theft-and>
- Olivero, N., Greco, A., Annoni, A. M., Steca, P., & Lowry, P. B. (2019). Does opportunity make the thief? Abilities and moral disengagement in illegal downloading. *Behaviour & Information Technology, 38*(12), 1273-1289.
- Ouvrein, G., De Backer, C. J., & Vandebosch, H. (2018). Online celebrity aggression: A combination of low empathy and high moral disengagement? The relationship between empathy and moral disengagement and adolescents' online celebrity aggression. *Computers in Human Behavior, 89*, 61-69.
- Ouvrein, G., Vandebosch, H., & De Backer, C. J. (2017). Celebrity critiquing: hot or not? Teen girls' attitudes on and responses to the practice of negative celebrity critiquing. *Celebrity Studies, 8*(3), 461-476.
- Pozzoli, T., Gini, G., & Vieno, A. (2012). Individual and class moral disengagement in bullying among elementary school children. *Aggressive Behavior, 38*(5), 378-388.
- Runions, K. C., & Bak, M. (2015). Online moral disengagement, cyberbullying, and cyber-aggression. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 18*(7), 400-405.
- Seidler, K. (2019). Shedding Light on Retail Theft Statistics. <https://losspreventionmedia.com/shedding-light-on-retail-theft-statistics/>
- Sharma, N. (2020). Dark tourism and moral disengagement in liminal spaces. *Tourism Geographies, 22*(2), 273-297.
- Sharma, N., & Lal, M. (2020). Facades of morality: the role of moral disengagement in green buying behaviour. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal, 23*(2), 217-239.
- Shu, L. L., Gino, F., & Bazerman, M. H. (2011). Dishonest deed, clear conscience: When cheating leads to moral disengagement and motivated forgetting. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 37*(3), 330-349.
- Stone, P., & Sharpley, R. (2008). Consuming dark tourism: A thanatological perspective. *Annals of Tourism Research, 35*(2), 574-595.
- Sverdlik, N., & Rechter, E. (2020). Religious and secular roads to justify wrongdoing: How values interact with culture in explaining moral disengagement attitudes. *Journal of Research in Personality, 87*, 103981.
- Thatcher, A., & Matthews, M. (2012). Comparing software piracy in South Africa and Zambia using social cognitive theory. *African Journal of Business Ethics, 6*(1), 1-12.

- Thornberg, R., & Jungert, T. (2013). Bystander behavior in bullying situations: Basic moral sensitivity, moral disengagement and defender self-efficacy. *Journal of Adolescence*, 36(3), 475-483.
- Wang, S., & Kim, K. J. (2020). Consumer response to negative celebrity publicity: the effects of moral reasoning strategies and fan identification. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 29(1), 114-123.
- Wang, Y., Stoner, J. L., & John, D. R. (2019). Counterfeit luxury consumption in a social context: The effects on females' moral disengagement and behavior. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 29(2), 207-225.
- Venugopal, A., & Shukla, D. (2019). Identifying consumers' engagement with renewable energy. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 28(1), 53-63.
- Vuleta, B. (2021). 23 Corrupting Piracy Statistics You Must Know in 2021. <https://legaljobs.io/blog/piracy-statistics/#:~:text=9.,video%20piracy%20in%20the%20USA.&text=According%20to%20statistics%20on%20piracy,gross%20domestic%20product%20per%20year>.
- Yang, L., Cai, G., Yong, S., & Shi, H. (2020). Moral identity: A mediation model of moral disengagement and altruistic attitude. *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal*, 48(7), 1-13.