

## **Statement of Research**

My research examines how people form and maintain their self-concepts. This can be further divided into two streams. In the first stream, I examine how people form their self-images in the first place. That is, I ask what allows people to claim certain identities, whether it is their identity as a political activist, a cyclist, or a moral person. Following my interest in morality and virtue, my second stream of research examines how people maintain an image of themselves as virtuous in everyday life, across both moral and self-control domains. Specifically, I examine strategies that help people maintain a virtuous self-image in the face of violations of their self-standards. My projects are interrelated both through theory (i.e., on self-concept formation and maintenance of the virtuous self-concept) and through substantive topics (i.e., on **identity signaling and posing**, **prosocial behavior**, **emotions**, **health and goals**, and **dyadic consumption**). Although I have organized the projects below theoretically, I include hashtags to indicate their topical relationships as well at the end of each project.

### **Identity Formation**

First, a broader research stream on identity entitlement examines how people earn the right to incorporate certain identities into their self-views. Although a wealth of consumer research examines the effects of identity on consumption, I examine what allows consumers to claim an identity to begin with. Then, I examine this question in people's *virtuous* self-images. That is, what components go into a person's self-view as good and virtuous in everyday life? Although traditional research focuses on the amount of moral action, I examine the structure of moral actions, as well as how people's *emotions* reflect on moral character.

#### **I. Identity entitlement and poser avoidance**

In my research on entitlement, I find that consumers believe that one must “earn” an identity claim through sufficient personal investment into that identity (CV #16, Lin and Schaumberg, in preparation for submission to *Journal of Consumer Research*). For instance, one cannot legitimately call himself a feminist without either a personal relationship with the cause (e.g., being a woman), or other personal investments (investing time and money into the cause). Thus, those who engage in identity signaling behavior without the right credentials are perceived as posers (e.g., a person wearing a “feminist” T-shirt without sufficient personal investment). The fear of being viewed as a poser by others leads consumers to avoid identity-signaling consumption, even when it comes at a cost to them. For instance, novice cyclists avoid wearing high tech cycling jerseys that would signal a cycling identity, even though they got it for free and it would enhance their performance. **#identity signaling and posing**

#### **II. Components of a Virtuous Self-Concept**

I am further interested in what allows people to claim an identity as a moral, virtuous person. Traditional research focuses on moral actions as a key contributors to moral judgment and character. In contrast, I examine the structure of prosocial behavior and consumers' emotional responses as determinants of moral character.

**Structure of prosocial behavior.** Related to the above work on posers, I find that people are viewed as “moral posers” when they engage in prosocial behavior all at once rather than when they space the same amount of prosocial behavior out over a long period of time. For instance, people are perceived as less moral when they volunteer for 30 days in a row than once a

week for 30 weeks, and also when they donate a large sum of money at once rather than a smaller amount at a time, spread out over a long period of time (17, Schaumberg and Lin, in progress). **#prosocial behavior #identity signaling and posing**

**Emotions.** I propose that people believe they should experience emotions that reflect virtuous characteristics (e.g., compassionate) even when those emotions are negative. Indeed, I find that not feeling compassionately enough for suffering others (e.g., in response to a documentary about the effects of Bullying) can be threatening to one's moral self-concept (CV #21, Lin, Reich, and Kreps, in progress). As a consequence of this framework, I find that, in contrast to traditional hedonic motivations in emotion regulation, people do not always find it appropriate to repair their moods (CV #1, Lin, Reich, and Kreps 2022, *Journal of Marketing Research*). Although ice cream might be a welcome mood repair opportunity after watching a sad dramatic film like *The Notebook*, it may seem inappropriate after *Schindler's List*. **#emotions**

Furthermore, I find that people feel uncomfortable when hedonic content interrupts negative-yet-appropriate affect (CV #14, Lin, Reich, and Kreps, working paper). In an online experiment, consumers felt uncomfortable when they read a negative tweet that they *should* feel sad about (e.g., a tweet about the death of earthquake victims) followed by a frivolous tweet (a tweet about eating Chipotle every day). This was particularly true for those who view themselves as more moral. Thus, when marketers place consumers in such situations, it feels like a profane mix of affect that consumers are likely to avoid. **#emotions**

In a related ongoing project led by my Ph.D. advisee Xueqi Bao and her co-advisor Amitava Chattopadhyay, we find that consumers judge others negatively for not sustaining appropriate affect (CV #22). This work examines how social media influencers are viewed when they post promotional content directly after posting about significant life events. Because people are expected to have sustained emotion after a significant life event, and to maintain an intimate space with their followers, the promotions are viewed as more inappropriate following significant (vs. non-significant) life events. This leads the promotions to backfire, leading consumers to be less interested in them and judging the influencers themselves less positively. **#emotions #identity signaling and posing**

However, the takeaway is not that people should always show as much emotion as possible when viewing negative moralized content or in response to events in their lives. Showing too much emotion can be deemed inappropriate as well. Like my research showing that people must feel entitled to an identity to engage in identity signaling, I find that people are viewed as being entitled to a certain amount of emotional response depending on their personal investment in the eliciting events. Showing more emotion than what they are deemed to be entitled—even in a direction typically deemed as morally appropriate—can lead others to view them as socially manipulative and less moral. For instance, showing an extreme emotional reaction at a mere acquaintance's funeral or at the loss of a political candidate whom one did not spend much time or money supporting can lead to negative judgments (CV #20, Lin and Kreps, in progress). **#emotions #identity signaling and posing**

### **Maintaining a Virtuous Self-Image**

Above, I examined what allows people to claim identities, and particularly what allows them to claim that they are a good and virtuous person. However, consumers commonly struggle to act in line with their “code of virtue,” which prescribes how they must think, feel, and act in order to maintain a virtuous self-image across various domains (e.g., being healthy, moral). How do consumers violate their codes (e.g., eating unhealthy food, acting out of self-interest) while maintaining a virtuous self-image? My second stream of research examines strategies people use

to shape their actions to be consistent with their codes. Although traditionally examined rationalization strategies can be useful, I suggest that consumers can also engage in behavioral strategies that directly shape their actions to be consistent with their code, rendering rationalization unnecessary. I organize these strategies below in temporal order through the decision process. I propose this order reflects how self-protective those strategies are, with earlier strategies being more protective and later strategies being less protective of one's moral self-view. Finally, I argue that rationalization strategies come as a last resort in the decision-making process, occurring only after it is clear that one cannot achieve virtue and self-interest at the same time.

## I. Pre-Violation Strategies

**Avoiding virtuous options.** When facing prosocial requests, many consumers feel trapped—in complying with or refusing the request, they must either lose their time or money, or they must violate their code of virtue. But by behaving strategically to avoid the appeal, consumers can avoid the tension altogether. For instance, when choosing between a difficult prosocial task and three fun tasks, I show that people avoid being trapped between the prosocial and fun tasks when possible (CV #7, Lin, Schaumberg, and Reich 2016, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*): In this study, some participants were presented all four options in a single choice set, and chose which task to engage in. Other participants viewed the same four options split into two choice sets, and picked the choice set they ultimately wanted to choose a task from; this let them avoid a direct choice between a prosocial and a fun task. Participants in this condition preferred to avoid the choice set containing the prosocial task—even at the cost of forgoing the fun task that was paired with it. Fewer participants chose both the prosocial task and the fun task paired with it than predicted by the control group (who viewed all four options in one choice set). Thus, the opportunity to avoid the prosocial request led both the prosocial organization and the consumer to be worse off; the prosocial organization received significantly fewer volunteers, and consumers had to give up the opportunity to participate in a fun task (even if that was the task they most wanted). Although people could choose the self-interested option (e.g., the fun task) and rationalize their decision (e.g., “I probably wouldn't have been helpful”), many prefer to avoid the decision altogether. **#prosocial behavior**

Another way consumers attempt to avoid prosocial requests is by reducing their perceived competence in related domains (CV #5, Liu and Lin, equal contribution, 2018, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*). For instance, when participants believed that academically competent people would be asked to engage in a prosocial behavior (providing uncompensated feedback on a pamphlet), they were less persistent on a task that reflected academic competence than if the prosocial behavior had a self-interested component (being paid to proofread the pamphlet). Thus, people are even willing to trade off their own perceived competence to avoid facing a prosocial request. This allows consumers to maintain perceptions of their moral warmth to others and themselves. **#prosocial behavior #identity signaling and posing**

One way to help consumers sidestep these unpleasant conflicts without having to give up other desired outcomes or lower their perceived competence is to allow them to leave the outcome up to fate. I have found that, when given the option, a substantial subset of people choose to remove their agency from the choice altogether and to be randomly assigned to a prosocial or self-interested outcome (CV #4, Lin and Reich 2018, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, Special Issue: Marketplace Morality). Participants choose to rely on chance because they feel torn between these outcomes, and feel less moral self-reproach afterwards than when choosing a self-interested outcome—thus including a random option can increase consumer

welfare. Furthermore, including a random option can help increase prosocial behavior in the context of charitable donations. **#prosocial behavior**

**Avoiding identity-violating options.** In another project, I examine how people tradeoff the conflict between having preferred consumption options and maintaining their male social identities. Specifically, in a project led by my Ph.D. student Sherrie Xue, we find it violates male gender norms for men to share food with other men because it reflects too much intimacy (CV #10, Xue, Lin, and du Plessis, invited revision at *Journal of Consumer Research*). That is, sharing food between men violates heterosexual standards that are central to the male gender role. Thus, men avoid joint food sharing options altogether, even when it comes at a cost (e.g., paying more money, getting less variety) to avoid violating this standard. Interestingly, we also find that men avoid sharing even though they feel that they *should* share. This added complexity suggests that sharing avoidance in service of adhering to an obsolete gender standard violates one's own self-standard. **#dyadic consumption #health and goals**

**Delaying tempting vice.** Another way that people can avoid violating their code of virtue in the self-control domain is to give themselves the opportunity to delay vice behavior by preserving it for later. In research led by my Ph.D. student Sherrie Xue in collaboration with Pierre Chandon and Andde Indaburu (CV #18, in preparation for submission to *Journal of Consumer Research* or *Journal of Marketing Research*), we find that giving people preservation options (e.g., a to-go container) leads people to consume less, as they are more mindful not to overconsume. This allows them also to order more to their liking, and a larger variety, without concern of overconsumption or waste. **#health and goals**

## II. Mid-violation strategies

**Change the context to make one's behavior seem better.** I also explore how people can manipulate their social contexts to make their actions seem code-consistent. That is, social norms play an important role in dictating what is allowed by one's code (e.g., "I'll have a drink if everyone else is doing it!"). I find that people actively create local descriptive social norms to justify their own indulgence. For instance, consumers encourage others to match their behavior when they have chosen to indulge (relative to if they have abstained from indulgence; CV #15, Lin, Wheeler, and Xue, in progress). This shifts the local descriptive norm so that indulging is relatively normative, and no longer violates their code. Thus, although social influence is typically viewed as exogenous to actors, I show that actors also play a role in influencing their social influence. They change the situation to match their code rather than resorting to rationalization. **#dyadic consumption #health and goals**

In a related project led by Szu-chi Huang, we find that people manipulate their social comparisons when pursuing goals, giving them a sense that they have made progress themselves (CV #3, Huang, Lin, and Zhang 2019, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*). That is, when pursuing goals alongside others, they sabotage others who are pursuing the same goals. For instance, they can provide more difficult problems for another person doing a problem-solving task. This ironically leads people to feel better about their own behavior, and allows them to relax their efforts toward their own goals. **#dyadic consumption #health and goals**

## III. Post-hoc strategies

**Justifying based on the outcome of bad behavior.** The above strategies change the quality of the violation such that the behavior no longer reflects low self-control or bad intentions. However, if people cannot actively make their behavior seem more code-consistent, they can justify their behavior based on the observed outcomes of their actions, rather than the

intentions or circumstances surrounding their decision to take action. For instance, I find that those who have decided not to go to the gym will check whether the gym happened to be closed, because they would feel less guilty if the gym had been closed (CV #11, Lin, Zlatev, and Miller, under review at *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*). However, I argue that because people intuit that the intention behind an action reflects one's virtuousness more than the consequences of it, the use of such justifications is motivated. As evidence of this, I find that whereas people allow such justifications to excuse their own behavior, they do not excuse others' decisions under the same justifications; also, they recognize that incidental justifications *shouldn't* make them feel better about their code violation, even though they do. Thus, although people know it is illegitimate, they can actively seek factual evidence that their behavior was not in fact impactful to reduce their guilt. **#health and goals #prosocial behavior**

#### **IV. Rationalization as a Last Resort**

When the above strategies are not available, people can shift to rationalization of their sinful decisions. However, I argue that rationalization is nobody's first choice. I use dynamic contexts—contexts in which available options shift over time—to examine the lengths to which people go to avoid rationalization. In one project, I posit that people use rationalization only as a back-up for when their first choice—self-interest without self-reproach—is unavailable (CV #2, Lin and Miller 2021, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*). As in my prior work cited above (CV #4), I find that many people choose to flip a coin to assign themselves and another participant to tasks of varying pleasantness. In this work, however, after flipping the coin, participants have the opportunity to ignore the coin flip and assign themselves to an outcome. What do they do when that coin does not come up in their favor? As previous researchers (i.e., Batson et al. 1998), I find that people tend to ignore the coin flip and assign themselves the positive outcome. Unlike prior work, however, I find that people do not set out intending to ignore the coin's outcome; instead, they blindly hope to achieve the positive outcome without self-reproach. Only when that option is not available do people renege on their decision to flip the coin by using rationalization strategies to literally switch decision strategies (i.e., explicitly switching from “use randomizer” to “skip randomizer and assign myself”). Thus, rationalization comes as a last resort. **#prosocial behavior**

Might it be worse, though, to choose a moral path only to abandon it later than it does to simply stick to that path? I posit that once consumers have chosen a self-protecting strategy, their moral self-view is enhanced, and they are therefore not likely to seek further strategies. For instance, of participants who were considering volunteering, participants who were given a legitimate justification to not volunteer (e.g., having an appointment at that time) had higher moral self-regard than those who did not have such a justification (CV #6, Lin, Zlatev, and Miller 2017, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*). That is, they attributed their behavior to outside circumstances, rather than their own desire not to volunteer (e.g., “I would volunteer if I could”). However, to maintain this high moral self-regard, they must commit to their justification even if it is removed (e.g., the appointment is canceled). Thus, ironically, those who have an excuse that is removed are more likely to engage in prosocial behavior than those who did not have an excuse in the first place. In addition, I find that people who are paid to engage in prosocial behavior over-attribute their behavior to their own motivation (e.g., “I care about at-risk youth”). Contrary to traditional overjustification effects, they are consequently *more* likely to engage in prosocial behavior after that payment is removed than people who were never offered payment. They created a new standard (i.e., “I care about at-risk youth”) that they must avoid violating. These findings reveal the psychological constraints on the consumer's ability to

justify self-interested behavior, while offering interventions that leverage the consumer's biased attributions to increase prosocial behavior. **#prosocial behavior**

## **V. Self-Presentation Strategies**

Finally, when people cannot justify their behaviors to themselves, they can try to justify their behavior to others. I examine motivations towards traditionally virtuous behaviors, such as diet and exercise, and suggest that consumers sometimes believe that their motivations are not in themselves virtuous. Specifically, I suggest that, although consumers are motivated to improve their physical appearance, they believe appearance-related motivations are not socially acceptable (e.g., reflecting vanity, low self-respect, and endorsement of harmful societal standards of beauty; CV #12, Lin, Woolley, and Liu, under review at *Journal of Consumer Research*). Thus, although consumers pursue these appearance-relevant motivations in private (e.g., choosing articles about improving their physical appearance), they share more socially acceptable motivations (e.g., articles about mental clarity, heart health) with others, for instance, on their social media feeds. **#identity signaling and poser avoidance #health and goals**

## **Conclusion**

My goal as a consumer behavior researcher is to understand the many ways through which consumers build and maintain their identities in everyday life. I examine various consumption behaviors, such as identity signaling consumption, consuming moral content, engaging in prosocial behavior, and being healthy in individual and joint consumption contexts. In doing so, I draw on and expand theory from the self-control, emotion regulation, social influence, self-enhancement, self-evaluation and morality literatures. I reveal shared self-maintenance mechanisms across these domains, and work towards a unifying theory of virtue maintenance in consumer behavior.