Pathways for Avoiding Self-Sanction:
How Consumers Give Themselves a PASS on Virtue Violations

Stephanie C. Lin

Department of Marketing, INSEAD

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Correspondence for this article should be directed to Stephanie C. Lin (stephanie.lin@insead.edu), INSEAD, 1 Ayer Rajah Ave., Singapore 138676.

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Abstract

Despite motivations to see themselves as virtuous, consumers commonly engage in behaviors that are bad for themselves or others, such as eating unhealthy food or refusing prosocial requests. I introduce the Pathways for Avoiding Self-Sanction (PASS) model, which explains how consumers violate their standards for virtue without self-sanction. This model posits that consumers have a subjective threshold that they must not cross lest they incur self-sanction and outlines three main pathways through which consumers succumb to temptation of bad behaviors without crossing this threshold: the self-based path, the behavior-based path, or the threshold-based path. By drawing on shared psychological processes between self-control and moral decision-making, the PASS model organizes self-sanction avoidance strategies across literature in marketing, psychology, organizational behavior, and behavioral economics, offering a comprehensive and parsimonious view of the mechanisms through which consumers engage in maladaptive behaviors that harm themselves, others, and society.

Keywords: self-concept, self-control, morality, prosocial behavior, vice-virtue, justification

Consumers often engage in behaviors that are bad for themselves or others. They indulge in chocolate cake when they are on a diet and splurge on luxury products they cannot afford. They also turn down charitable requests and choose unsustainable products. These examples of consumer behavior vary in many ways—some are about self-control, while others reflect moral choices—but they all have the potential to violate the consumers' view of themselves as virtuous. Despite having different bases of virtue violation, I argue that these bad actions are enabled through similar psychological processes.

I introduce the Pathways for Avoiding Self-Sanctions (PASS) model, which posits that consumers are motivated to prevent their self-views from crossing a self-sanctioning threshold—a dividing line between their *virtuous* and *bad* selves. This model identifies three primary paths through which consumers allow themselves to violate their standards for virtue while avoiding self-sanction: the self-based path, the behavior-based path, and the threshold-based path. In essence, they can adjust their initial self-view, reinterpret their behavior, and shift the threshold itself. Through taking these paths, consumers engage in greater levels of bad behavior than they might otherwise.

To contextualize the PASS model, I first review virtuous self-concepts in the self-control and moral literatures, outlining differences in virtuous behavior across these domains. Next, I outline shared psychological processes in virtue violations across these domains, clarifying how these differ from other forms of self-threat. Finally, I present the PASS model, using its three paths to review and classify individual strategies in the self-control and moral domains, and discuss novel implications of this model.

The Role of Virtue in Self-Evaluation

Self-control conflicts are typically defined as those that weigh off short-term hedonic

interests and longer-term interests or higher order goals (Khan & Dhar, 2007; Wertenbroch, 1998). Virtuous consumption in this domain includes maintaining a healthy lifestyle through diet or exercise (Kivetz & Zheng, 2006; Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2009; Wertenbroch, 1998), or maintaining financial security through saving money and making practical purchases (Khan & Dhar, 2006). Consumers often also consider consumption that serves intellectual or cultural pursuits to be virtuous, such as choosing a highbrow documentary over a lowbrow film (Khan & Dhar, 2007). Furthermore, people can display virtue by diligently working at their job or on their schoolwork instead of procrastinating; purchasing products in service of these self-improvements, like productivity apps or intelligence-boosting tea, over more hedonic options can also represent virtuous consumption (Allard & White, 2015). In all these cases, people must overcome the affective appeal of hedonic pleasure to stick to their long-term goals of being healthy, financially stable, cultured, successful, and competent (Hofmann, Baumeister, Förster, & Vohs, 2012; Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999). Thus, in situations of self-control conflict, virtuous behaviors benefit the consumers' future self (Wertenbroch, 1998).

Moral conflicts, by contrast, involve trading off others' and societal welfare over one's own self-interest (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010; Lin, Reich, & Kreps, 2023). Rather than relying on any one definition of morality (of which there are many; Graham et al., 2013; Gray & Keeney, 2015; Haidt, 2008; Kohlberg, 1971; Schein & Gray, 2018), this model assumes that people desire to see themselves as having good moral character. To do so, people must generally be concerned with the welfare of others and society (Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, & Kim, 2014; Haidt, 2003; Lin et al., 2023), and have characteristics that reflect those concerns, such as being kind, generous, compassionate, helpful, fair, trustworthy, cooperative, principled, and honest (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014). Thus, they must engage in behaviors that

reflect these characteristics, such as helping others and abiding by societal rules and norms, and avoid behaviors that signal disregard for others or societal standards. Broader psychology research often operationalizes virtue in the moral domain as upholding societal standards even at a personal cost, rather than violating those standards through unethical behaviors like lying (Shalvi, Eldar, & Bereby-Meyer, 2012), cheating (Bryan, Adams, & Monin, 2013; Peer, Acquisti, & Shalvi, 2014; Wiltermuth, 2011), or stealing (Berman & Small, 2018). These also apply to consumer contexts; virtuous consumers may honestly follow a return policy instead of returning a slightly used product (Kang & Kirmani, 2024), properly dispose of products instead of littering (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990), or pay for online content they could easily illegally download for free.

Rather than avoiding breach of explicit societal standards, consumer research often operationalizes virtuous behavior as effortfully engaging in helpful behavior. This includes prosocial giving of time or money (Berman & Small, 2012; Lin & Reich, 2018; Lin, Schaumberg, & Reich, 2016) or socially conscious consumption, such as purchasing ethically made or sustainably sourced products, and practicing sustainability more broadly (Paharia, Vohs, & Deshpandé, 2013; Peloza, White, & Shang, 2013; Reczek, Irwin, Zane, & Ehrich, 2017). Following vegetarian or vegan diets for sustainability and animal cruelty reasons also falls into this category for some people (Feinberg, Kovacheff, Teper, & Inbar, 2019; Rozin, Markwith, & Stoess, 1997). Other virtuous consumption-related behaviors that aim to help others or society more broadly may include spending one's time and energy to advocate for moral causes (Akhtar & Wheeler, 2016; Cheatham & Tormala, 2015), promote egalitarian values, such as by reviewing and purchasing from Black-owned businesses (Sharma, Frake, & Watson, forthcoming), or even to consume morally relevant content more thoroughly and emotionally,

such as news content relating to human suffering (Lin, Reich, & Kreps, 2023). Thus, the beneficiary of moral behaviors is others in society or society as a whole, and the tradeoff one faces is between oneself and others rather than between one's current self and one's future self.

Shared Processes in Virtue Violations

Despite the differences in the nature, beneficiary, and domains of behavior, self-control and moral behaviors are both colloquially and academically referred to as virtuous (Baumeister & Exline, 1999; Berman & Small, 2018; Mooijman, Meindl, & Graham, 2020). In many cases, consumers face no conflict in maintaining their standards—they may enjoy the taste of healthy food and desire to help others. However, often, consumers are tempted to violate their standards for virtue, leading them to behave in ways considered sinful, full of vice, and simply *bad* across domains. The following sections explore how shared psychological foundations underlie these virtue violations across these domains.

Virtue Violation and Self-Sanction as Self-Imposed Self-Threat

When people demonstrate self-inconsistencies, they feel threatened and seek to resolve these inconsistencies (Aronson, 1969; Festinger, 1962; Greenwald & Ronis, 1978; Heider, 1946; Leippe & Eisenstadt, 1994). A particularly threatening inconsistency is the failure to meet their self-standards. People generally strive to see themselves positively and set standards for traits and behaviors they consider positive (Higgins, 1987; Stone & Cooper, 2001), such as being competent, attractive, and likable. Facing evidence that they have fallen short of these standards—whether due to negative feedback, social comparison, or social exclusion—can create a self-concept threat (Tesser, Crepaz, Collins, Cornell, & Beach, 2000), often prompting compensatory actions to restore self-esteem (Mandel, Rucker, Levav, & Galinsky, 2017).

The present model focuses on virtue-related self-standard inconsistencies, whereby

consumers are conflicted between viewing themselves as virtuous and engaging in bad behaviors[1] (see Figure 1). By my definition, a person is virtuous when they meet their subjective self-standards in terms of demonstrating high self-control (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2012; Prelec & Bodner, 2003; Touré-Tillery & Fishbach, 2015) and good moral character (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Blasi, 2004; Lin et al., 2023). In both domains, consumers are tempted to violate their standards: they desire to eat pizza instead of salad, buy expensive products instead of saving their money, download content illegally instead of paying for it, and keep their money instead of donating it. To overcome hedonic and selfish interests and engage in virtuous actions instead, they must recruit self-control (Baumeister & Exline, 1999; Hofmann, Meindl, Mooijman, & Graham, 2018). Failure to resist temptation leads to self-sanction—a self-threatening evaluation that they lack self-control, or are self-interested or unethical—essentially, an evaluation that they are bad. Importantly, although it is possible for virtue threats to occur externally like in other domains (e.g., via social comparison or negative feedback), typical virtue-related threats—on which the current model focuses—are desired (Hofmann et al., 2012, 2018) and deliberate, making them foreseen and self-imposed.

Guilt and Restorative Processes

One common form of self-sanction in response to virtue violations is guilt, which typically arises when people violate their personal standards (Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). Indeed, guilt is common when people refuse prosocial requests (Lin, Zlatev, & Miller, 2017; O'Keefe & Figgé, 1999), cheat or steal (Peer et al., 2014), harm others (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994; Hooge, Nelissen, Breugelmans, & Zeelenberg, 2011; Zeelenberg & Breugelmans, 2008), engage in indulgent, unhealthy consumption, or overspend on hedonic products (Dahl, Honea, & Manchanda, 2003; Huberts, Evers, & Ridder, 2014; Xu &

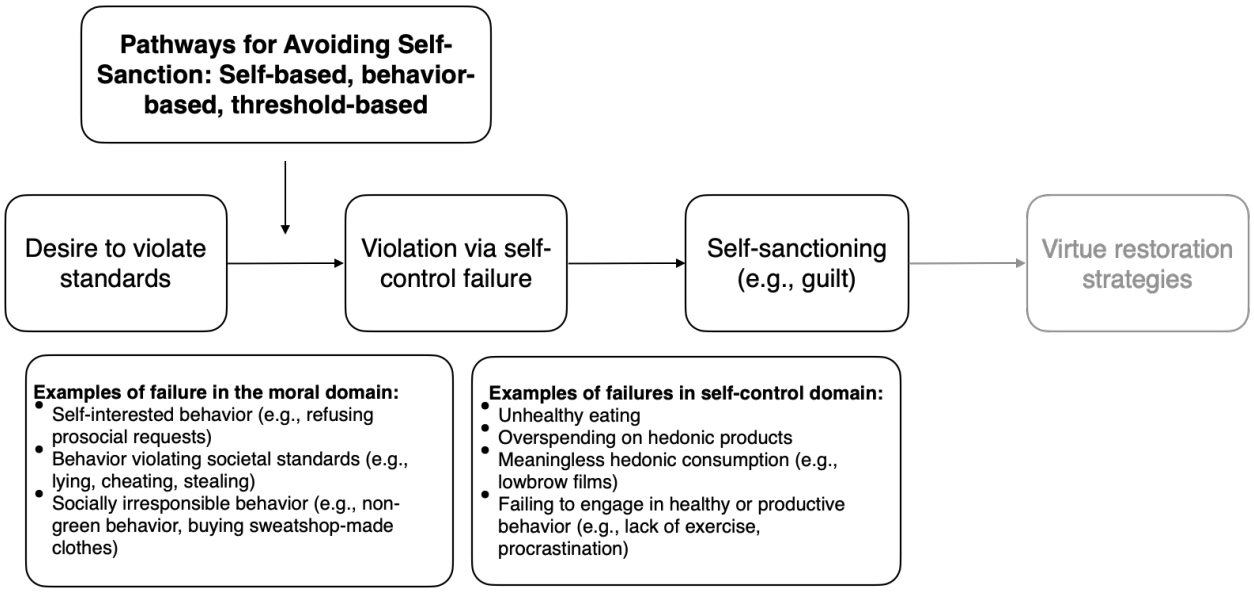
Schwarz, 2009).

Guilt motivates people to regulate their behavior and repair wrongdoings (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007), for instance, through restorative actions. People can directly correct for their unhealthy behaviors with healthy (Dhar & Simonson, 1999) or utilitarian (Ramanathan & Williams, 2007) choices. Similarly, moral failures—such as declining a charitable request or making a selfish choice—may lead individuals to act prosocially or purchase virtuous self-improvement products (Allard & White, 2015; Brañas-Garza, Bucheli, Espinosa, & García-Muñoz, 2013; Conway & Peetz, 2012; U. Gneezy, Imas, & Madarász, 2014; Jordan, Mullen, & Murnighan, 2011), reducing this guilt (Ding et al., 2016).

These restorative processes are not unique to virtue-related self-standard inconsistencies, but are integral to other models of self-threat (Mandel et al., 2017; Tesser et al., 2000; vanDellen, Campbell, Hoyle, & Bradfield, 2011). However, because violations of virtue are deliberately chosen and thus self-imposed, consumers have the opportunity to *avoid* self-sanction altogether rather than merely mitigating it. The PASS model therefore diverges from other models of self-threat by focusing not on post-violation restoration (Figure 1, in grey), but on the anticipatory strategies that consumers use to sidestep self-sanction entirely (Figure 1, bolded), intervening early in the psychological process and enabling violations to occur.

Figure 1

Psychological model of virtue violations in self-control and moral domains



Note: The PASS model focuses on self-sanction avoidance strategies which occur in anticipation of the self-control failure, which enable violations, whereas virtue restoration strategies occur only after violations and subsequent self-sanction have occurred.

The PASS Model

Because consumers deliberately violate their standards of behavior, they can also anticipate the accompanying self-sanction. Ideally, this anticipatory guilt would constrain their behavior, leading them to simply avoid the guilt-eliciting action and practice virtue instead (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996; Keinan & Kivetz, 2008; Simonson, 1992). However, because these violation behaviors are inherently tempting, consumers want to enjoy their benefits without experiencing guilt. Rather than leading to more virtuous behavior, this anticipatory guilt[2] can instead motivate people to preemptively recruit strategies that allow for standard violations while avoiding self-sanction—letting consumers have their cake and eat it too. Critically, this leads to more bad behavior than would be engaged in without the use of these strategies. Thus, the PASS model works towards explaining mechanisms through which consumers engage in maladaptive behaviors that harm themselves, others, and society.

The PASS model is built around the idea that consumers have a self-sanction threshold

that delineates the boundary between viewing themselves as *virtuous* and *bad* (e.g., having low self-control, being self-interested or immoral; see Figure 2). This threshold is idiosyncratic to each individual's self-standards. For instance, some consumers feel guilty about eating cake whereas others do not hold a self-standard that discourages such pleasures (Vosgerau, Scopelliti, & Huh, 2020). For the former, eating cake may cross their threshold, whereas for the latter, it would not. Similarly, whereas some moralize eating meat and would consider doing so a virtue violation, most others do not (Feinberg et al., 2019; Rozin et al., 1997). These thresholds are also context-dependent. For example, people may have set stricter standards for diet and exercise when they have a seasonal weight loss goal, or have stricter moral self-standards when observed by others (Peloza et al., 2013). This model assumes that each consumer has a self-sanction threshold specific to their own self-standards in their current context.

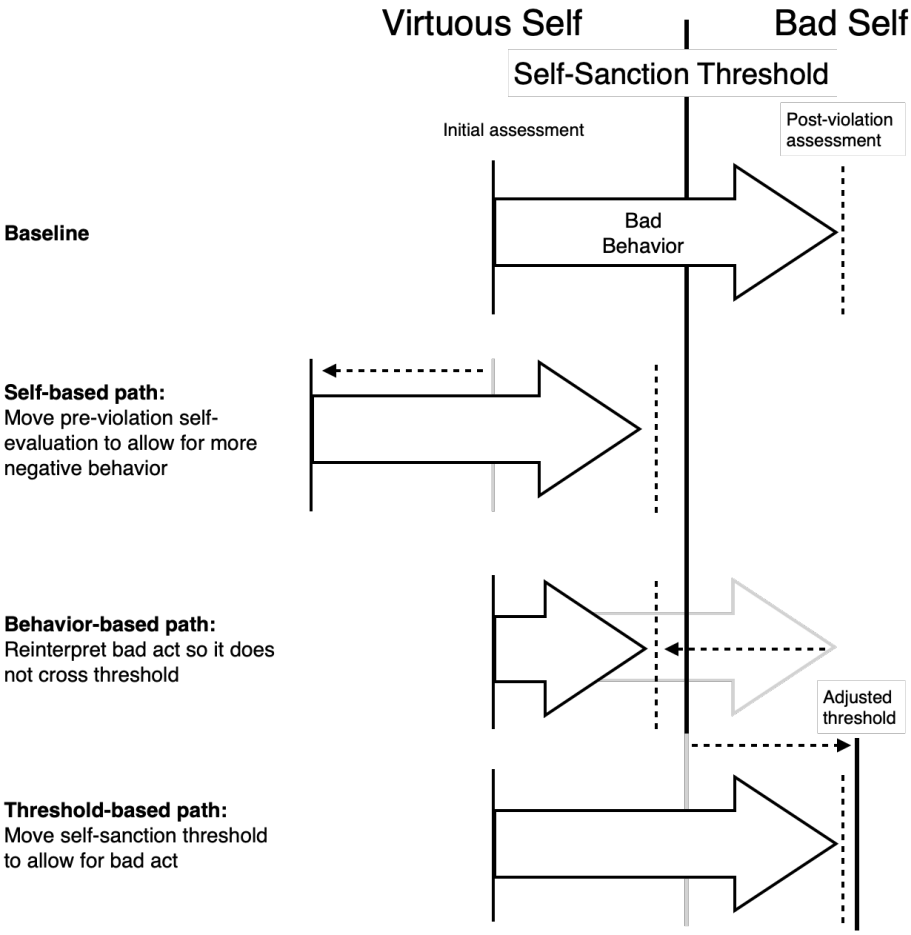
The PASS model assumes that consumers have a baseline initial self-assessment of themselves as virtuous, placing them on the virtuous side of the threshold. However, they are tempted to engage in bad behaviors that, given sufficient magnitude, would cross the self-sanctioning threshold (Figure 2, baseline). This model reveals that, to allow themselves to engage in bad behavior while avoiding self-sanctions, consumers can go down one of three paths: the self-based path, the behavior-based path, or the threshold-based path. Specifically, this model suggests that consumers can (1) move their initial, pre-violation self-evaluation, (2) reinterpret the bad behavior such that it is not sufficient to cross the self-sanction threshold, or (3) adjust their self-sanction threshold so that the bad behavior no longer crosses it. These paths thus enable them to engage in behaviors they would have otherwise avoided.

Next, I examine strategies from existing literature and their alignment with the PASS model. Analyzing research across marketing, psychology, organizational behavior, and

behavioral economics, reveals a unifying model that integrates seemingly disparate findings. This approach synthesizes findings while highlighting areas where the model provides new insights or potential research avenues.

Figure 2

Pathways for Avoiding Self-Sanction (PASS) model



Notes: Dotted arrows depict path. Each path comprises individual strategies allowing consumers to avoid crossing the self-sanction threshold. Grey color indicates pre-strategy states. See Web Appendix for detailed table summarizing all findings.

Self-Based Path

Before violating their self-standards, consumers can first increase their perception of their own virtue, giving themselves a buffer that allows them to engage in bad behaviors without

crossing their self-sanction threshold. In other words, by feeling more virtuous initially, consumers feel that they are allowed to, or even deserve to, engage in bad acts they might otherwise avoid. This can occur by engaging in more virtuous behavior or perceiving oneself to be more virtuous, within and across behavioral domains, thereby adjusting their initial self-assessment so that their later bad behavior does not push them over the line into self-sanction territory.

Balancing

Consumers feel justified in indulging when they have previously behaved virtuously in the same domain. For instance, they are more likely to indulge when they have eaten healthfully or exercised beforehand, allowing for extra calorie intake (Dhar & Simonson, 1999). People are also more likely to indulge when they perceive that they have made goal progress, or plan to make goal progress in the future, in that domain. For instance, those who anticipated high goal progress on a weight loss or academic goal were more likely than those who anticipated low goal progress to eat unhealthy food or engage in social activities, respectively (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005). Even making vicarious goal progress by viewing healthy items has been shown to allow for more indulgence (Wilcox, Vallen, Block, & Fitzsimons, 2009).

Licensing

Like balancing, licensing occurs when previous virtuous behaviors are used to allow for subsequent bad acts, but licensing occurs across behavioral domains. This occurs by reinforcing that one is generally good and virtuous. Boosting one's self-view by recalling prior moral behavior (Jordan et al., 2011) or one's positive moral traits (Sachdeva, Iliev, & Medin, 2009) can allow consumers to engage in less ethical consumption behavior, including donating less or neglecting to engage in pro-environmental behaviors. Furthermore, engaging in ethically

virtuous consumption—like purchasing green products (Mazar & Zhong, 2010) or bringing a reusable bag to the grocery store (Karmarkar & Bollinger, 2015)—can lead to negative behaviors unrelated to sustainability, such as less prosocial and more immoral behavior (stealing, lying) acts, or more indulgent purchases, respectively. Even simply imagining engaging in ethical behavior (e.g., volunteering or helping others) has also been shown to lead to indulgent consumption behaviors in the self-control domain, such as buying luxury clothing (Khan & Dhar, 2006) due to a boosted self-concept in the moral domain.

Outside of morally good behavior, people can earn indulgence as a reward for engaging in high self-control. Imagining or recalling instances of high self-control can lead to purchase of more indulgent products (Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2009). Furthermore, high self-control in the form of hard work and effort can allow room for indulgence. Effort in the context of loyalty programs has been shown to lead to higher choice of luxury products like massages, vacation packages, and wine, particularly for work-related efforts and for those who have higher tendencies to feel guilty (Kivetz & Simonson, 2002). Similarly, working hard on effortful tasks can lead to more self-indulgence in the form of lowbrow films and magazines (Kivetz & Zheng, 2006) or the consumption of more calories (Prinsen, Evers, & Ridder, 2018).

Furthermore, obtaining high achievements, independent of effort expenditure, can lead to a shift in one's perceived virtue, allowing for greater indulgence. Surveys on self-gifting indicate that people regularly give indulgent self-gifts as rewards not only for effort, but for achievements (Mick & DeMoss, 1990). Indeed, experiments show that those who received positive performance feedback (Kivetz & Zheng, 2006), or who were induced to feel pride about past personal accomplishments (Salerno, Laran, & Janiszewski, 2015; Wilcox, Kramer, & Sen, 2011) were more likely to choose indulgent offerings including massages, unhealthy food, and

entertainment gift cards.

People can even use anticipated future virtuous behavior to license present bad behavior. For instance, people who anticipated volunteering or donating blood were more likely to engage in morally questionable behavior in the form of racially insensitive responses or stereotype endorsement (Cascio & Plant, 2014). In the consumer context, being (overly) optimistic about one's future goal progress can lead to goal-inconsistent choices; for instance, thinking about one's future healthy behavior can lead to less healthy choices in the present (Zhang, Fishbach, & Dhar, 2007). In these cases, consumers allow their future good deeds to shift their present self-assessment.

Premeditated Licensing

In cases of licensing, consumers' initial boost to their self-assessment happens independently of the virtue violation that follows, and is conveniently used as a self-sanctioning avoidance strategy when the chance to engage in the violation arises. The temptation or expectation of violating virtue standards can also motivate consumers to engage in premeditated licensing in which they construe or engage in more virtuous behaviors to allow for those anticipated violations. For instance, those who expected to engage in indulgent snacking estimated that a prior snack had lower calories (May & Irmak, 2014). People can even inflate the number of calories in forgone snacks (Effron, Monin, & Miller, 2013) or exaggerate the amount of racism in which they "could have" engaged (Effron, Miller, & Monin, 2012) to license desired indulgence or racially insensitive behavior, respectively.

Consumers can also convince themselves that they will engage in virtuous behavior in the future to license present standard violations. Those who anticipated an opportunity to donate in the future were more likely to lie in the present for higher payoff (U. Gneezy et al., 2014), and

those who believed they would face a choice between a vice (e.g., lowbrow products, unhealthy snacks) and a virtue (e.g., highbrow products, healthy snacks) later were more likely to choose vice in the present (Khan & Dhar, 2007). Notably, participants did not necessarily follow through on these virtuous commitments, particularly in the latter findings.

Behavior-Based Path

Consumers can also reinterpret the bad behavior itself such that it no longer crosses the self-sanction threshold. This path consists of strategies that can be organized according to which aspect of the behavior it justifies. First, people can stretch the rules delineating violation behavior to justify their behavior, such that their behavior no longer constitutes a violation. Second, they can change their interpretation of their own responsibility for engaging in the behavior. Lastly, they can distort the perception of harm caused by their behaviors.

Stretching the Rules

Consumers can reduce the perceived severity of their violation based on ambiguity in the rules delineating virtue, thereby making the behavior less clearly negative. First, they can use the fact that a self-serving outcome *could have* occurred to justify reporting that outcome. For instance, they misreport numerical figures for self-interested rewards more when these numbers are within the range of possible outcomes (albeit unlikely; Schweitzer & Hsee, 2002) than when they were outside the range. They are also more likely to misreport a self-serving outcome when they feel it was *nearly* selected, rather than clearly not selected. In one study, people were more likely to report a wrong digital die roll number for a higher payoff when it was proximally close to being randomly selected by a fixation cross generated on the screen (Pittarello, Leib, Gordon-Hecker, & Shalvi, 2015). In another study, people reported higher die rolls (corresponding with higher payoffs) when they were instructed to roll a die three times (with only the first one

"counting") than when they only rolled the die once (Shalvi, Dana, Handgraaf, & Dreu, 2011). This is because they were more likely to view higher die rolls in these additional rolls, and that observing these counterfactuals made the overreporting as "less of a lie." Similarly, when a falsehood *may* become true in the future, people feel justified lying about it in the present (Helgason & Effron, 2022). Although these examples are not squarely tested within consumption contexts, these findings may extend to scenarios like consumers exaggerating qualifying purchase expenditure to secure discounts.

Bad behaviors also seem less bad when the violation is converted to a different means or form. For instance, people are more likely to steal when the money is in the form of tokens (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008), something convertible to, but different from, money. This may be relevant when consumers are tasked to report loyalty points for rewards rather than monetary spending. Similarly, consumers are more likely to pay for (less justifiable) hedonic products (vs. more justifiable utilitarian products) by spending time rather than money (Okada, 2005).

Avoiding Responsibility

People can avoid feeling that they had agency in their standard violations. For example, they can avoid the prosocial request altogether (Andreoni, Rao, & Trachtman, 2017; DellaVigna, List, & Malmendier, 2012; A. Gneezy, Gneezy, Riener, & Nelson, 2012; Lin et al., 2016), thereby allowing them to avoid the prosocial act without attributing it to their refusal to engage in it. People may also avoid these self-other tradeoffs at a cost to themselves in the form of cash payment (Dana, Cain, & Dawes, 2006; Lin et al., 2016), desirable products (A. Gneezy et al., 2012), and the opportunity to engage in otherwise desirable consumption, like watching a clip from an interesting television show (Lin et al., 2016). Importantly, this occurs even when the choice is completely private, suggesting that people wish to avoid self-sanction rather than only

negative social evaluation (Lin et al., 2016).

People can also choose to be randomly assigned between a self-interested and prosocial option, hoping to receive the self-interested option without having to actively choose it. In a modified dictator game, a substantial proportion of participants allowed a computer (24%) to randomly assign them to a prosocial or self-interested outcome (Dana, Weber, & Kuang, 2007). In other work, people have been shown to actively use randomizers to choose whether to donate time or money to prosocial organizations (Lin & Reich, 2018). Rather than being driven by a desire for fairness, this behavior was shown to be driven by participants' hope that they would achieve the self-interested outcome without having to actively select it (Lin & Miller, 2021), thereby acting selfishly without the accompanying guilt. In the same vein, people indulge more when they feel less responsible for their choice. That is, because being served by others (rather than serving themselves) reduces people's responsibility in food consumption, they have lower anticipated self-sanction after indulgence, leading them to consume more indulgently (Hagen, Krishna, & McFerran, 2017).

Consumers also avoid information that would make them responsible for making high self-control or ethical decisions were they to have it. For instance, consumers have been shown to avoid empathy-inducing appeals to help so that they can avoid feeling obligated to help when they anticipate that helping would be costly (Shaw, Batson, & Todd, 1994). In the domain of socially conscious consumption, participants requested ethical attribute information (e.g., wood source) about products less frequently than they used it when the information was given, especially when the product was desirable (Ehrich & Irwin, 2005). In another demonstration, participants avoided options that came with information they would feel obligated to use, such as restaurants with calorie information on their menu (Woolley & Risen, 2018). In these cases,

people avoided information so they would not feel obliged to use it in consumption decisions, thereby avoiding the conflict altogether. Furthermore, people engage in motivated forgetting of unethical product attributes (e.g., about child labor) to alleviate pressure to incorporate it into their decisions (Reczek et al., 2017).

Discounting the Magnitude of Harm or Consequences

People can minimize or discount the negative consequences of their bad acts (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Consumers excuse selfishness in prosocial behavior by overweighting the risk that the charity may not receive a payout (Exley, 2015), using charity metrics to claim that their donation would be ineffective (Exley, 2020), or claiming that their own incompetence would render useless any attempt to help (Liu & Lin, 2018). Thus, consumers often allow themselves not to give by claiming that it would not be very helpful to do so.

Consumers can further overweight positive outcomes of bad behavior. They cheat more when it helps both the self and others (Wiltermuth, 2011), and spend more on hedonic goods when they have nominally goal-oriented or utilitarian purposes (Chiou & Ting, 2011). When tempted by sweatshop-made clothes, consumers may emphasize benefits of sweatshop labor as a source of income and development (Paharia et al., 2013). They may also engage in unethical consumption acts if they also do good by punishing wrongdoers; for example, in one study, participants were more likely to return used clothing against store policy if the company's stance on a sociopolitical issue opposed their own (Kang & Kirmani, 2024). In addition to exaggerating positive outcomes, consumers also avoid information regarding the potential negative consequences of their decisions. For example, those who wanted to act out of self-interest in a modified dictator game avoided finding out whether that choice would lead the other participant to a negative outcome (Dana et al., 2007).

Threshold-Based Path

Consumers can also adjust their standards for what constitutes a violation. In these cases, they still acknowledge that their desired bad behavior has negative consequences (e.g., that cake has a certain number of calories or that littering harms the environment), but they move their self-sanction threshold to allow for this negative behavior. These self-standards can be moved temporarily or long-term.

Being wronged

When people have paid their dues in the form of unfair suffering, they may feel that they should no longer be expected to adhere to such a strict standard of virtue. After unfairly losing a computer game, participants in one study claimed more selfish money allocations on future tasks (Zitek, Jordan, Monin, & Leach, 2010). Similarly, negative moods can lead people to believe they are more deserving (e.g., "I feel bad, I deserve it"), leading to less resistance to tempting options, like dessert (Heiland & Veilleux, 2022; Taylor, Webb, & Sheeran, 2013). People even exaggerate the severity of their struggles when faced with indulgent temptations to give themselves the right to partake (Tezer & Sobol, 2021).

Changing Threshold to Accommodate Conflicting Goals

Opposing goals (e.g., having fun) can lead people to shift their threshold. For instance, consumers can justify their indulgent behaviors by allowing them under special circumstances, such as special occasions (Shu & Sharif, 2018; Taylor et al., 2013). "Cheat days" also effectively move their threshold to temporarily allow for greater violations (Sharif & Shu, 2016). Consumers may also think about how they may regret missing out on having fun in the distant future, which moves their threshold over in the present, relaxing their self-standard around what constitutes a violation (Keinan & Kivetz, 2008).

Social Proof

People use others' behavior to inform where their current threshold for self-sanction should be drawn. For instance, even though they know littering is harmful for the environment, seeing others litter or engage in other disorderly acts may make people feel that engaging in such bad behavior is acceptable (Cialdini et al., 1990; Keizer, Lindenberg, & Steg, 2008). In the self-control context, although a consumer may know the extent to which a dish violates their diet, they may simply feel better seeing others engage in equally bad behavior, leading them to indulge more when others do (Burger et al., 2010; Herman, Roth, & Polivy, 2003; Lowe & Haws, 2014; McFerran, Dahl, Fitzsimons, & Morales, 2010). They may even encourage others to indulge to have a partner-in-crime for their own desired indulgence (Lin, Wheeler, & Xue, 2020), thereby moving their threshold to allow them to indulge as well.

Multi-Path Strategies

Sometimes, specific strategies may involve more than one path. For instance, the original research on moral credentials is distinct from that on moral licensing, suggesting a self-based strategy that also leads to a reinterpretation of behavior. That is, people who first established themselves as egalitarian by disagreeing with racist comments were more likely to engage in questionably discriminatory behavior later (Monin & Miller, 2001). Similarly, those who anticipated that they might later appear racially biased engaged in preemptive behaviors to prove that they were not racist before the potentially biased behavior occurred (Merritt et al., 2012). This not only shifts one's initial self-assessment but creates a different interpretation of the bad act itself. That is, showing that one is egalitarian gives the benefit of the doubt to ambiguous acts; instead of assuming that the behavior itself is racist, it may be interpreted as benign or even fair. Strategies that involve taking multiple paths may be particularly effective in that they create

greater psychological allowance for bad behavior.

Furthermore, consumers may recruit strategies from multiple paths simultaneously. When choosing to eat a slice of chocolate cake, they may underestimate calories in an earlier meal (self-based), underestimate the calories in the cake (behavior-based), and suggest that the special occasion allows for it (threshold-based). When choosing not to donate, people may assure themselves of their own moral virtue by recalling times they have helped others before (self-based) while also thinking about how they have been wronged (threshold-based) and about how most of their charity will go to overhead anyway (behavior-based). This model suggests that the number of paths through which consumers recruit strategies may depend on the perceived size of the violation and the effectiveness of each individual strategy. On average, larger violations should need more psychological manipulation across all elements of the model (although a strategy that is effective at moving one of the elements greatly would also work).

General Discussion

Why do consumers turn down prosocial requests, purchase unsustainable products, support unethical business practices, litter or waste products, break rules, overeat, overspend, and watch trashy shows instead of edifying content, even when these actions violate their standards for virtue? I draw together insights from consumer behavior, psychology, behavioral economics, and organizational behavior to present the PASS model—a unified model explaining how consumers avoid self-sanction while violating their standards for virtue. By categorizing strategies as following self-based, behavior-based, or threshold based pathways, the PASS model provides a clear taxonomy of self-sanction avoidance mechanisms.

Whereas prior models have focused on either self-control (Huberts et al., 2014) or moral (Bandura et al., 1996; Shalvi, Gino, Barkan, & Ayal, 2015) domains, the present model

integrates self-control and morality. This contributes to a call for a better understanding of overlapping psychological mechanisms between the self-control and moral domains (Hofmann et al., 2018) by specifically examining shared routes of justification. Instead of focusing on *whether* (Huberts et al., 2014) or *when* (Shalvi et al., 2015) justification strategies occur, it explains *how* they occur broadly across self-control and moral domains. By suggesting that the multitude of individual tactics can be thought of as instances of three broad pathways to avoiding self-sanction, this model clarifies that many mechanisms are at their core variations of the same fundamental processes. Thus, this model parsimoniously streamlines a wide range of strategies, thereby simplifying our understanding of self-sanction avoidance mechanisms, and illuminates potential redundancies, bringing into question the marginal value of uncovering individual effects.

The PASS model weaves a unifying thread through a wide range of consumption behaviors, but the landscape for people's standards of virtue—and consumption behavior they can do to meet those standards—is broader than those reviewed here and will continue evolving. For instance, this model may help explain how consumers give in to the temptation of other maladaptive consumption such as alcohol use, drug abuse, and gambling (Reimann & Jain, 2021). Many consumers may also be setting increasingly higher self-standards for social activism, taking to the streets or social media to advocate for moral causes, boycotting brands for supporting causes they deem to be immoral (Liaukonytė, Tuchman, & Zhu, 2023), and promoting equity by supporting minority-owned brands and businesses through reviewing and purchasing (Sharma, Frake, & Watson, forthcoming). Consumers are also facing increasing pressure to reduce consumption of meat (Sparkman & Walton, 2017) and products more generally for sustainability purposes. The PASS model helps explain how consumers may

endorse these values while avoiding committing to these actions without suffering self-judgment. This model can contribute to models of ethical judgments of practitioners as well (Mascarenhas, 1995), offering insight into how marketers or salespeople themselves might avoid self-sanction when engaging in ethically questionable marketing practices, such as violating users' privacy or misrepresenting attributes of their products. Ultimately, the PASS model provides a comprehensive model that is adaptable to the evolving landscape of virtuous consumption.

Future Directions

Predictors of Paths

Future research may focus on identifying predictors of which routes will be chosen. Individual differences and situational factors could play a role in determining reliance on self-based, behavior-based, or threshold-based paths. For example, as suggested by prior research, it is possible that people who excel at self-enhancement would be better at taking the self-based path. Those with low self-esteem, who may view themselves as less deserving in general, may be more inclined to the behavior-based path (vanDellen et al., 2011). Consumers are also likely to use whichever strategy is most readily available to them. Behavior-based strategies may be more available when behaviors are particularly ambiguous or when infractions are minor, and thus reinterpreting them or minimizing their harm is easier. When these are not readily available, consumers may resort to taking the self-based or threshold-based path. Also, when lacking cognitive or temporal resources, it may be easier to engage in self- or threshold-based strategies. Believing that one "deserves it" or that "it's a cheat day" may be less situationally specific and more habitual, making these strategies more readily accessible.

Effectiveness of Different Pathways

In addition to examining antecedents to which paths are chosen, future research can

examine which paths are more effective. It is possible that self- and threshold-based paths are less effective and more fleeting than the behavior-based path. Although these paths allow for a temporary lower standard of behavior, they may not be retrieved from memory in the same way. Because the surrounding, irrelevant context may be removed (e.g., whether one has previously engaged in altruistic behavior, or even merely recalled engaging in altruistic behavior), an action such as refusing to donate, eating chocolate cake, or lying to get more money, may be recalled at face value. (As an exception, when balancing a goal literally leads to the vice behavior being allotted, such as remaining within a calorie limit, it should remain justified in one's memory). On the other hand, strategies that involve reinterpretation of a behavior can be recalled. Remembering an act as less harmful, like endorsing sweatshop labor as a positive step for economic development, may have lasting effects in justifying one's behavior. Future research could investigate these predictions.

It may also be fruitful to examine whether paths that are more successful for oneself are equally successful in mitigating judgment in the eyes of others. The self-based path—particularly strategies that are self-rewarding prior self-control or high achievement—may follow a normative script, and observers may thus believe that indulgences are justified on those occasions. People may also balance their impressions of actors who engage in virtuous acts and then violate their standards, particularly when the virtuous act is a moral one and the standard violation is smaller in magnitude (e.g., indulgence). The threshold-based path may also seem defensible, particularly when it involves balancing other goals (e.g., cheat days). On the other hand, although behavioral-based strategies may effectively stave of self-sanctions, they may be more transparent to others, who have their own interpretations of those behaviors. That is, people may be skeptical of others who psychologically minimize their harms, derogating these actions

as clear rationalization strategies.

Temporal Dynamics

Understanding temporal dynamics of the PASS model—such as when consumers might permanently adjust their self-standards—is another intriguing direction for future exploration. People often "let themselves go," setting different standards for their health over time; those who were once vegetarian may later decide that they no longer subscribe to such moral standards. After repeated evidence that one cannot live up to one's own standards (or after repeated temptation that increases the appeal of standard violations), people may slowly change their thresholds for virtue to reflect the extent to which they feel that they can realistically succeed in engaging in self-control. Furthermore, consumers may remove certain criteria from their self-standards altogether. If a consumer decides, "I simply will never be the type of person who can make it to the gym," they may remove this from the standards they set for themselves.

Furthermore, this model naturally elicits questions about the lasting impact of virtuous and bad behaviors on one's self-evaluation. What determines how long these actions continue to shape one's view of their current state or character? It may be that acts of greater magnitude have more enduring effects while minor lapses allow people to return behind their threshold. It is also possible that there are specific time markers that indicate a "reset" of one's self-evaluation. Exploring these dynamics in future research could reveal how individuals manage their virtuous self-images over time.

Differences Between Self-Control and Moral Domains

Although people can take self-based, behavior-based, and threshold-based paths to avoiding self-sanction in both moral and self-control failure, they may do so in different manners. The difference in goal structures in the two domains may affect the types of strategies

people can recruit to avoid self-sanction. Engaging in singular immoral acts can have lasting effects on judgments of character (Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2012). Thus, in the moral domain, showing virtuous intent and character is more important than showing willpower (Berman & Small, 2018). This implies that a single bad action readily pushes one over the threshold into the "bad self" territory. Therefore, self-sanction avoidance strategies largely seem nonconscious, irrational, and self-deceptive, allowing immoral actors to maintain a morally positive character assessment, rather than allowing the actors to understand and excuse the negative nature of their behavior (Bandura et al., 1996; Monin & Miller, 2001; Pittarello et al., 2015).

On the other hand, goal pursuit is not as deontological. One can be behaving consistently with one's goals so long as the progress is positive overall. For instance, so long as one is at a calorie deficit for a weight loss goal, eating indulgent foods remains on the "virtuous self" side of the threshold. This suggests that strategies in intertemporal choice can be (but are not necessarily) conscious (Huberts et al., 2014; Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2009) and arguably rational. For instance, eating an unhealthy dessert after a virtuous and healthy dinner seems rational from the additive perspective of goal pursuit.

Broader Implications of the Model

Magnitude of Virtue and Violations

The PASS model suggests that the action that licenses must be greater in magnitude than the action it licenses. This may explain why moral virtue seems to justify both moral and self-control standard violations (Khan & Dhar, 2006), whereas high self-control behaviors typically allow for violations in the self-control domain (Dhar & Simonson, 1999; Effron et al., 2013; May & Irmak, 2014; Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2009). Whereas moral virtues move one's initial virtue substantially, self-control virtues, such as eating a salad, may move one's initial virtue barometer

only slightly—allowing only for small violations. Although untested, this model suggests that highly virtuous self-control behaviors could allow for small moral violations.

Distinction Between Behavior- and Threshold-Based Mechanisms

This model suggests that mechanisms from prior research may be imprecise. Behavior- and threshold-based mechanisms are distinct, but can be difficult to disentangle. It is not clear in some cases whether people feel justified violating their standards because they believe the behavior itself is not as bad or because they shift their standards of how "good" they really should be expected to be. For instance, seeing others litter (Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991) could lead one to believe that littering is not harmful, or, as I suggested above, it could shift one's standards of what it means to be virtuous. Some research has attempted to tease this apart. For instance, my coauthors and I found that consumers were found to encourage others to join them in indulgence not because the indulgence itself would seem less unhealthy, but because having a "partner-in-crime" moved the current standard of behavior to allow for indulgence (Lin et al., 2020).

Adherence to Standards

Although I use the PASS model to taxonomize strategies consumers use to violate their standards for virtue, the principles behind the model can also predict when people will adhere more strictly to their standards. For instance, when feeling less deserving or entitled (Cavanaugh, 2014; Goor, Ordabayeva, & Keinan, 2020), they may abstain from indulgence, as their "initial assessment" is shifted over toward the "bad self" line. Also, making the magnitude of a bad act greater should lead to more avoidance of the act, such as by making victims more identifiable (Small & Loewenstein, 2003), leading the act of not donating to feel more egregious. Certain circumstances may also make thresholds either less forgiving (i.e., further to the left in Figure 2)

or more salient. For instance, priming people with their self-concepts (e.g., with a mirror) leads people to be more likely to adhere to their standards, potentially by making a threshold more salient (Batson, Thompson, & Chen, 2002; Diener & Wallbom, 1976).

Individual Differences in Baseline Assessments

The PASS model focuses on context-dependent thresholds and self-assessments, but incorporating chronic differences in these elements of the model may provide insight into different patterns of behavior. For instance, in Figure 2, people whose threshold for what calls for self-sanction is shifted to the right may have more sociopathic tendencies, as they simply do not view egregious behaviors as immoral. Also, those who feel overly positive about themselves (initial assessment is further to the left in Figure 2) may also engage in more negative behaviors. This intriguingly maps onto the pattern that those with excessively high self-evaluation, like narcissists, engage in more immoral behaviors (Caligor, Levy, & Yeomans, 2015).

Moral Opportunities and Tests

This model can also integrate the distinction between two types of moral acts that affect self-view: moral opportunities and moral tests (Miller & Monin, 2016). Moral opportunities are behaviors that allow people to view themselves more positively if they engage in them, but do not harm their self-view if they do not; moral tests, on the other hand, are behaviors that lead people to a more negative self-view if they do not engage in them, but do not enhance self-view if they do not. The PASS model has focused on moral conflicts in the form of tests—those that would drive people over the threshold to a *bad* self-view. Moral opportunities, however, shift evaluation toward an even more virtuous self-view (i.e., leftward in Figure 2). These are likely to be behaviors that consumers actively seek out rather than conflicts that are imposed on them (e.g., through being asked to donate). For instance, some people may not feel that they are

violating their personal standards by *not* supporting minority-owned businesses, but feel a boosted sense of virtue when they do; this may lead them to engage in one-time performative actions, such as leaving positive reviews, that do not ultimately translate into their consumption habits (Sharma et al., forthcoming). The PASS model may suggest that crossing the self-sanction threshold may create a tangible self-discrepancy that may be stronger than a drive to build one's moral self-view further, although future models may consider other thresholds (e.g., "good self" and "better self") that consumers may hold.

Integration with Self-Threat Research

Notably, the PASS model focuses on strategies that *enable* bad behavior to occur. Indeed, empirical tests reviewed here occur prior to when consumers violate their virtue standards—but are often already tempted to—and most findings reveal that consumers engage in greater negative behavior when engaging in taking these paths to self-sanction avoidance than they otherwise would have. Understanding how consumers allow themselves to engage in behaviors that negatively affect themselves and others is a question of both practical and theoretical importance, explaining why so much research has been dedicated to the plethora of strategies consumers use to excuse their own sins. However, the tenets of the model can be more broadly applied to bad behaviors that have already occurred. Virtue restoration strategies (Figure 1) are not only compensatory acts, but can include some of the strategies reviewed here. These can occur after they have engaged in the bad act and have experienced the subsequent guilt—for instance, one can endorse sweatshop labor after purchasing sweatshop-made jeans and feeling guilty, rather than before choosing to purchase them. Other restorative strategies may also occur post-hoc, such as motivated misremembering of one's behavior (Carlson, Maréchal, Oud, Fehr, & Crockett, 2020).

Furthermore, this model can more broadly integrate the aforementioned self-consistency literatures (Festinger, 1962; Mandel et al., 2017; Thibodeau & Aronson, 1992), in which threats are undesired, externally inflicted, and often unforeseeable and uncontrollable. To do so, Figure 2 can be adjusted such that the "bad behavior" arrow represents any threat, and the "behavior-based" path is conceptualized as the "threat-based" path. Furthermore, a self-based compensatory path could be depicted as a subcategory of the self-based path, with the post-threat assessment shifting to the left of the threshold rather than the initial assessment shifting to *allow* for negative behavior.

Existing self-evaluation maintenance strategies can be mapped onto this model. For instance, self-affirmation, which broadly protects people against many sources of self-threat (Critcher & Dunning, 2014; Sherman & Cohen, 2006), takes the self-based path to maintaining positive self-evaluation. Indeed, like licensing, self-affirmation has been shown to bolster the self to subsequent self-threats (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Stone & Cooper, 2001). Attributing failure to external circumstances (Fitch, 1970), including self-handicapping by impeding one's own performance when they anticipate failure[3] (Schwinger, Wirthwein, Lemmer, & Steinmayr, 2014), is an example of reinterpretation of the threat.

Social comparison—which has been found to protect against self-threat after both performance failure (Wood, Giordano-Beech, & Ducharme, 1999) and moral failure (Fleischmann, Lammers, Diel, Hofmann, & Galinsky, 2021)—effectively shifts one's threshold for what constitutes a threat. Devaluing domains on which one is threatened (Crocker & Major, 1989; Goor, Keinan, & Ordabayeva, 2020) also shifts this threshold. This brings up the idea that thresholds may move dynamically depending on salience, importance, or threat in other self-aspects, adding a dynamic component to the threshold-based path. Taken together, although this

model is distinct from models of compensatory behaviors (Mandel et al., 2017), future theory and research may be developed to integrate the self-sanction avoidance work with classic models of self-threat.

Concluding Remarks

Although the self-control and moral self-concept literatures have evolved independently, they agree that consumers desire to see themselves as virtuous and, when tempted to violate this self-standard, they look for ways to grant themselves a "pass." The PASS model integrates these literatures by organizing self-sanction avoidance strategies into three pathways consumers follow to permit themselves to do bad things. This model provides a clearer and more unified understanding of the mechanisms that allow for and lead to increased bad consumption behavior, with negative consequences for consumers, others, and society.

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[1] The conflict between engaging in standard-consistent behaviors and violating one's standards has sometimes been conceptualized as acting in line with one's *should* (vs. one's *want*) self (Bazerman, Tenbrunsel, & Wade-Benzoni, 1998; Bitterly, Mislavsky, Dai, & Milkman, 2015; Milkman, Rogers, & Bazerman, 2008; Reczek et al., 2017; Woolley & Risen, 2018). Although the should/want literature can include both moral and self-control domains (Bazerman et al. 1998), it largely focuses on intertemporal choice (Milkman et al., 2008) and temporal mechanisms (e.g., focus on short- vs. long-term rewards) that are not necessarily assumed in literature on moral decision-making. Moral decision-making literature tends to focus on self-other tradeoffs. Thus, rather than relying on the want/should distinction, I use *virtuous* and *bad* terminology.

[2] A recent model of guilt suggests that there are two instances of guilt after violating one's standards–after the decision and after the action (Duke & Amir, 2018). This model suggests that the motivation to recruit self-sanction avoidance strategies may be driven by experienced guilt about the decision; using the self-sanction avoidance strategy thus decreases the subsequent guilt. Time to recruit strategies may also add to the ameliorating effects of the decision-enactment gap.

[3] Like in virtue domains, in cases of self-handicapping, self-threat is anticipated (although not desired), and the reduction of self-threat occurs a priori.