

When consumer decisions are moral decisions: Moral Foundations Theory and its implications for consumer psychology

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Abstract

Although researchers have considered the role of morality in consumer psychology over the years, such investigations often fail to (a) recognize the different values that consumers might hold, and (b) provide proper context for why different moral considerations emerge. Moral Foundations Theory (MFT; Graham et al., *Advances in experimental social psychology*, 2013, Academic Press; Haidt & Joseph, *Daedalus*, 2004, 133, 55) provides just such a conceptual framework for understanding the diversity of moral thought that exists across cultures and demographic groups. MFT describes morality not as a monolithic entity, but as a pluralistic set of intuitive values that were shaped by evolutionary pressures and edited by distinct cultures. We review the central claims of MFT and describe how the theory can offer new insights when applied to consumer psychology, providing examples from existing research on persuasion, emotion, and prosocial behavior.

KEYWORD

Ethics and morality

INTRODUCTION

Every day, people make countless moral judgments and decisions. At first blush, this might seem like an overstatement, but consider the simple act of eating breakfast: Is your coffee fair-trade? Do your eggs come from free-range hens who were fed a purely natural diet? How far did those bananas travel to reach your breakfast table? Is the store where you bought all of these groceries paying their workers enough? Even the split-second decision regarding whether to eat or throw away a piece of toast after you accidentally dropped it on the floor for three seconds likely reflects your moral sense of right and wrong, because that decision is influenced by some intuition you have about the purity of the food you consume or your moral aversion to wasting food. All of these considerations go into decisions that many people make before 8 a.m., leaving an entire world of additional moral decisions to be made once they set foot outside

their homes and start interacting with other people, each of whom has their own sense of morality with which they must grapple.

To be a consumer is to be concerned with morality, whether people actively realize it or not, because their consumption decisions are directly influenced by their moral values and have meaningful moral consequences for the world. Though the examples related to fair-trade coffee or free-range eggs may seem relatively modern, the moral considerations at play—such as concerns about ensuring that others are fairly compensated or that other beings are not harmed—are not new. In fact, the underlying principles date back to ancient times, serving as foundations for fields as diverse as philosophy, cultural anthropology, and, yes, consumer psychology. In the present work, we describe Moral Foundations Theory (MFT; Graham et al., 2013; Haidt & Joseph, 2004) and outline how this theory helps to make sense of the development of morality across different cultures, giving

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greater insight into how people make judgments and decisions.

MFT did not emerge in a vacuum. Throughout human history, few topics have sparked as much interest and thought among scholars as morality has. While the study of morality can be traced back over millennia, the modern field of moral psychology dates back to foundational work by Kohlberg (1969), who contended that all moral judgments emerge as children develop their sense of justice. As they grow up, Kohlberg argued, individuals learn to take each other's perspectives and appreciate whether and why an action is fair or unfair. Gilligan (1982) subsequently noted that justice alone cannot account for all instances of moral judgments and proposed that morality develops along the two dimensions of justice and care, a postulation with which Kohlberg later agreed (Kohlberg et al., 1983). This bi-dimensional conceptualization also resonates with Turiel's (1983) definition of the moral domain, which emphasizes prescriptive judgments of justice, rights, and welfare—the former two corresponding to care considerations—that ought to govern individuals' relationships. Kohlberg, Gilligan, and Turiel all converged on the idea that morality is centered on how *individuals* ought to relate to and protect other individuals (Graham et al., 2013).

While these *individualizing* virtues are important drivers of moral judgments, Shweder (1990) argued that they represent only a subset of the moral domain, the part that is most prevalent in secular Western societies. Many cultures around the globe praise not only these, but also virtues related to respect for groups, traditions, and gods. Based on this idea, Shweder proposed three moral systems: autonomy, which relies on individual rights, prevention of harm, and justice; community, which entails communal values and the preservation of hierarchy, institutions, and the social order; and divinity, which is based on the values of sanctity and purity—that is, the quality of holiness. Fiske (1991) also considered group-based moral ideals but proposed that moral judgments followed the same four “relational models” used to describe more general social relationships: Communal Sharing, Authority Ranking, Equality Matching, and Market Pricing (Rai & Fiske, 2011). While Shweder's (1990) and Fiske's (1991) theories share some similarities (e.g., they both incorporate moral principles that *bind* individuals to groups, in addition to individualizing principles), they essentially address different issues—moral discourse and interpersonal relationships, respectively (Graham et al., 2013).

MFT emerged from an effort to construct a unified framework for understanding morality across cultures. To that end, Haidt and Joseph (2004) built on evolutionary approaches to identify innate and universal human moral systems, and on research investigating how morality varies across cultures to understand what moral systems are used by different cultures as they build their moral codes. In addition to characterizing

an individual's morality as the output of universal evolutionary pressures that established initial foundations for moral judgments, further developments of MFT (Haidt & Graham, 2007) identified five candidate moral foundations: Care/harm, Fairness/cheating, Loyalty/betrayal, Authority/subversion, and Purity/degradation. The first two—Care and Fairness—are often referred to as *individualizing* foundations, whereas the latter—Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity—are also known as the *binding* foundations. Although recent research has revealed the possibility of additional foundations (e.g., ownership, liberty; Atari & Haidt, 2023; Iyer et al., 2012) and has proposed breaking Fairness into Equality and Proportionality (Atari et al., 2023; we elaborate on this point in the next section), those five initial foundations are the ones on which most empirical work has been done (Graham et al., 2013).

It is important to note that MFT is descriptive, not normative, as opposed to other approaches to morality such as Utilitarianism, Moral Absolutism, and Deontology. MFT focuses on what people actually do, not what they should do. Identifying a given value such as obedience to authority or in-group loyalty as a moral foundation does not mean that the value is necessarily positive or negative. Rather, MFT claims that these are constellations of judgments and behaviors that humans, across cultures, have moralized and explains the means by which they became moralized. Much of the MFT literature has focused on measuring moral foundations and demonstrating their pragmatic validity and relationships to external factors such as political ideology (Atari et al., 2023; Graham et al., 2009, 2011), without any normative dimension to claim whether these foundations *should* or *should not* be endorsed.

In the sections that follow, we explain the central claims of MFT, highlighting how this theoretical approach can also explain a wide array of consumer behaviors in a relatively parsimonious manner; indeed, we argue that MFT accounts better for a range of moral judgments and decisions than other morality theories that restrict the moral domain to just one or two foundations (e.g., Fitouchi et al., 2023; Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1969; Schein & Gray, 2018; Turiel, 1983). Not surprisingly, this theory has proliferated in many areas and has been particularly influential in understanding modern political differences (i.e., between liberals and conservatives; Graham et al., 2009). The present work, however, aims to move beyond this current application to political culture wars, instead setting the stage for researchers to apply the principles of MFT to consumer psychology writ large. After all, consumer psychology involves understanding what factors influence people's consumption decisions—what could be more influential than their beliefs about right and wrong? MFT is useful as it shows that morality is not a unidimensional construct, and the theory explains how and why people frequently arrive at similar beliefs while also explaining the

sources of vehement disagreements about different moral beliefs. In short, morality is complicated, but MFT helps to unpack some of that complexity, making better sense of why consumers buy, sell, trade, eat, drink, discuss, build, discard, and care about the things they do.

MORAL FOUNDATIONS THEORY AND ITS FOUR CENTRAL CLAIMS

Moral Foundations Theory contends that moral judgments are intuitive reactions of right and wrong guided by several psychological systems that evolved in the human mind from recurrent evolutionary challenges and were shaped by cultural learning. According to this postulation, MFT relies on four central claims: (a) nativism, the idea that there is a first draft of the moral mind developed from adaptive challenges; (b) cultural learning, the assertion that this first draft of the moral mind gets edited during development within a culture; (c) intuitionism, which maintains that intuitions come first and reasoning follows; and (d) pluralism, the claim that there are several psychological systems, rather than just one, that may guide moral judgments. We next review and expand on these four central claims.

Nativism: There is a first draft of the moral mind based on evolution

MFT argues that the origins of morality sprang from evolutionary utility. The evolutionary purpose of morality is to codify and preserve adaptively useful behavior, constituting a selection mechanism for cooperative behaviors in ways similar to natural selection of physiological features. Humans evolved as an ultra-social species highly prizing cooperation (Richerson & Boyd, 1998; Tomasello, 2014) facilitated by moral judgments and behaviors.

Such adaptive behaviors became innate, or *organized in advance of experience*. By this, we do not mean that innateness is hard-wired or insensitive to cultural influences. Instead, we borrow a writing metaphor, that “nature provides a first draft, which experience then revises” (Marcus, 2004, p. 34). Although individuals can learn different behaviors, some behaviors simply come more naturally than others. For example, the moral adage of retributive justice that prescribes “an eye for an eye” is easier to teach a child than the far less reciprocal instruction to “turn the other cheek.” Even with no experience with either, revenge comes more easily than forgiveness (Pinker, 2002; Spiro, 1956). Thereby, we can say revenge is more innate than forgiveness, even if individuals can learn to supplant revenge with forgiveness as the preferred moral action. The idea is that certain moral behaviors are easier and more natural; much like walking in the forest, it is easier to follow a pre-trodden,

cleared path than to blaze a new trail. It is possible to walk through the woods without a path, just more difficult. Over the course of human evolution, MFT argues, some behaviors became more organized in advance of experience, while others less so. Thereby, reciprocal revenge in response to harm is like a cleared path through the woods shaped by moral foundations, while forgiveness might require the greater effort of trailblazing.

How did moral foundations become innate? Evolutionary psychologists have argued that recurrent problems and opportunities over time have generated domain-specific cognitive adaptations that allow for rapid, effective responses (Pinker, 1997; Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). In an example of this kind of cognitive adaptation, a classic study demonstrated Rhesus monkeys were more innately prepared to fear snakes than to fear flowers despite comparable training regarding each stimulus (Mineka & Cook, 1988). Researchers showed young monkeys videos of adult monkeys reacting fearfully (or not) to a plastic flower or to a plastic snake and then observed how these young monkeys behaved on their own. The young monkeys reacted more fearfully to a plastic snake than to a plastic flower, suggesting that fear of snakes was more innate to the monkeys than fear of flowers.

The same kinds of evolutionary patterns exist for humans; for example, children have an innate value preference for sugary foods over broccoli. A parent can model liking broccoli, teach its benefits, and tie rewards to eating it. But such efforts to get a child to like broccoli more than sweets are an uphill battle because the tongue and brain have been designed to yield pleasure for tasting sugar more than for tasting broccoli, because sugar provides more efficient nourishment via easily absorbed caloric content. The same basic principle extends to many other domains, including the moral one (Tooby et al., 2005). For example, observing a fair exchange gives people more pleasure than observing an unfair one where one party cheats another, because fair exchanges facilitate the evolutionarily helpful goals of cooperation, harmony, and unity. Similarly, behaviors such as obedience to a group authority create more stability than dissent, and in-group loyalty generates greater feelings of security; behaviors that foster social functioning are associated with psychological benefits.

MFT identifies ways in which humans are similar across cultures because of shared behavioral solutions to shared recurrent problems. For example, all infants are naturally quite helpless and would die without effortful care, jeopardizing the survival of any society. Societal self-perpetuation requires caring for infants; hence, the adaptive utility of care became a solution prioritized as a moral value. The utility of care as a value can explain why it was widely agreed upon as moral, and the selection of this value as moral helps to perpetuate the behavior—being “moral” gives greater imperative to a value relative to other possible values.

Moral foundations include care, equality, proportionality, in-group loyalty, respect for authority, and purity, each of which serve a useful evolutionary function. Care is necessary for helpless infants and the infirm to survive. Equality and proportionality help enable cooperative action and maintain harmony within a group. In-group loyalty helps a group band together against challenges such as rival groups. Respect for authority facilitates structure and order in groups by giving certain individuals final say to mediate disputes, to streamline decision-making, and to assign and define roles. Purity protects from diseases and contaminants. All human societies faced needs and recurrent problems which these moral foundations helped address, hence their universal status as moral values. Empirical testing has supported this argument, finding common moral foundations across societies, including Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD; Henrich et al., 2010) ones and non-WEIRD ones (Atari et al., 2023; Doğruyol et al., 2019; Federico et al., 2013; Graham et al., 2013).

Understanding that humans share moral foundations across cultures has obvious value for consumer psychology. Take the case of selling household disinfectant. Consumers have pre-blazed trails for Care and Purity, so presenting the disinfectant as a way to maintain purity in the home by preventing germs or as a way to care for one's family are each likely to feel innately compelling. By contrast, an explanation of what chemicals are included in the disinfectant or how they deactivate bacteria may be a less motivating sales pitch. It is easier to walk a pre-blazed trail than to crash through the woods with a less innate approach.

To summarize, MFT's nativism pillar explains why human morality has similar foundations across cultures and how people are morally similar. Moral foundations developed because they usefully addressed similar, recurrent problems across thousands of generations. MFT provides predictive power and rules of thumb about which moral paths are pre-blazed, how people form moral judgments, and why people across cultures may agree that X is right and Y is wrong. This helps to clarify what moral intuitions people are likely to have and which moral behaviors will be easier versus more difficult to adopt. However, returning to the book analogy, the innateness of these morals is only a "first draft" of the mind. There are many cultural differences in morality that shared evolutionary pressures alone cannot explain; to explain these differences, we turn to the second pillar: cultural learning.

Cultural learning: The first draft of the moral mind gets edited during development within a culture

If nativism shows how people are morally similar, cultural learning sheds light on how people are morally different.

This pillar of MFT explores how the first draft of the moral mind is edited by culture and context. But which factors drive cultural learning? Just as the nativism pillar of MFT predicts that shared evolutionary problems led to shared moral solutions, MFT also predicts that having different recurring problems would result in different moral priorities and moralized behaviors. For example, societies in tropical climates do not face the recurring problem of harsh winters and so would not have developed innate behaviors and morals related to preparing for and surviving winter, such as food rationing through thrift and planning. Ancient societies would not have the recurrent problems of sustainability that modern ones do. Different problem sets require different responses, but when the problems are severe enough (e.g., pose substantial threats to ongoing survival, as harsh winters or climate change both do), those responses can become moralized.

Much as Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; see also Anderson, 1986, 1988; Arnold & Fischer, 1994) has helped explain the interrelationships between consumers and cultures through markets (and market shifts), MFT predicts that cultural dynamics and, indeed, market forces are likely to produce shifts in morals as well. Prior CCT research has largely focused on four areas: (1) how consumers form identities through their interactions with markets; (2) how consumers create feelings of social solidarity and generate cultural worlds via common consumption; (3) how social structures drive and sustain consumptive behavior; and (4) how markets construct ideologies and communicate normative messages (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

When considering the impact that markets have on consumer identities and normative messages, it is essential to recognize the heterogeneity of markets. Different markets and market norms emerge in different cultures due to specific external threats, connectivity to other markets, and proximate resource abundances and scarcities. For example, the discovery of a new mineral deposit in the American Old West typically brought an influx of male prospectors with frequently long hours, difficult work, and a lack of marital attachments, contributing to comparatively less restrictive social norms around alcohol use and prostitution (Milch & Samuels, 2006). In a more modern context, the loss of manufacturing jobs due to increased automation may produce widespread unemployment, a market force which in turn could foster a greater sense of out-group distrust and anti-immigration sentiment in an attempt to protect the remaining jobs in an area. Cultures have risen and fallen by market activity, such as the discovery of fossil fuels or the depletion of an economic activity. Just as market forces affect consumer behavior and social norms, cultural forces (including market forces) affect the development of moral norms and behavior.

Another way that culture edits the first draft of the moral mind is by developing "learning modules,"

described more simply as learning instincts, linking a pattern of appraisal to that of behavioral results (Sperber, 2005). That is, once a culture has developed a set of moral norms, those behaviors are passed on to new generations. To illustrate, imagine two young girls, one raised in a Hindu household in India and another in a secular home in the United States. Children in traditional Hindu households have frequently been taught to show deference to elders and guests, often touching their heads to the floor or feet of the objects of their reverence, while children in American households tend not to express deference via bowing. Though the American might still moralize the idea of deference, it is less likely to be repeatedly reinforced through the behavior of bowing, and therefore, deference may become less prioritized as a moral value than in the Hindu household. Accordingly, if both girls were to meet a dignitary, the girl from the United States would likely demonstrate less deference because she has less experience in the culturally specific practice (and knowledge) of bowing to adults. Importantly, the American girl would be less likely to moralize this interaction overall (Graham et al., 2013).

Research has demonstrated the myriad ways in which cultural learning shapes the structure of societies, creates social subgroups, and guides individuals to espouse different prioritizations of moral values. For example, Chinese farmers who grow more labor-intensive crops, like rice, developed stronger collectivistic morals than farmers from other cultures with less labor-intensive crops, like wheat, for whom growing and harvesting crops requires less community interdependence (Tahel et al., 2014). Liberals tend to live in more urban environments where they are surrounded by greater human diversity, whereas conservatives are more likely to live in rural locations with less frequent interaction with other cultures; accordingly, these groups tend to prioritize moral foundations differently. Liberals value care and fairness—foundations that espouse treating all individuals fairly and without harm—more than conservatives do, and conservatives value loyalty, purity, and deference to authority—foundations that bind individuals to their in-group, and exclude out-group members—more than liberals do (Graham et al., 2009).

The morality of a culture is based to some degree on what is adaptive in the respective time and place of the culture; the different circumstances in which societies find themselves influence how they rank and use moral foundations. Cultural learning can rationally account for differences in moral beliefs across cultures and describes why people from distinct cultures prioritize moral foundations differently.

To summarize, by explaining the role of cultural learning in developing modern approaches to morality, MFT can more accurately predict when and where different moral foundations are likely to be prioritized (i.e., how people are different). Moving beyond the pressures—both evolutionary and cultural—that have shaped moral

values, the next central claim of MFT explains the psychology of how people incorporate their values into their decision-making. Specifically, MFT argues that moral foundations drive people's *intuitive* responses to a vast array of decision-making stimuli.

Intuitionism: Intuitions come first

Herbert Simon wrote that “intuition is nothing more and nothing less than recognition” (Simon, 1992, p. 155). Think back to a time when you were rounding a curve on an unfamiliar road and sensed, before losing control, that you needed to slow down. You had an automatic, almost unconscious sense of needing to reduce your speed even without a loss of control and with no prior experience with this particular curve. However, because you had previously experienced thousands of similar curves at different speeds, your brain could recognize the pattern of a curve and decide on an immediate response. That is, your intuitive sense to slow down came as a result of recognizing and remembering appropriate speeds from previous curves, and you accessed your stored memory in a split second.

Moral intuitions work in a similar way: People experience morally relevant stimuli and develop patterns of behavior to respond that become second-nature, intuitive. Imagine if while rounding the same curve, you struck and killed a deer with your vehicle. Even if the animal died instantly, in a manner that did not affect the quality of its meat, you would probably not consider eating this deer. Though there is little functional difference between the freshness and quality of the meat from this accident and that obtained by a deer hunter, your car-struck deer might not even seem like an edible option.

Why then would this be the case? The deer killed by your vehicle is “roadkill.” You've likely seen (and smelled) roadkill previously—you may associate roadkill with animals like skunks and squirrels, think of decaying roadkill in an unsalvageable state, remember seeing insects or vultures or smelling a foul odor, or consider the very high risk of disease associated with roadkill. Although the deer from your accident poses no such risks, the manner of its death may cause you to retrieve the stored associations you have with roadkill in ways that preclude you from considering this venison as food. If you are not a hunter, you probably see this deer as disgusting or impure and refuse to eat it, even if you would typically eat wild venison of equal quality and safety. Going further, you might even judge a person negatively for eating such meat. However, if anything, consumption of the roadkill deer could be seen as more morally palatable, as it was killed unintentionally instead of deliberately and non-consumption could feel wasteful. Yet despite these rational arguments, you may still feel it is wrong or disgusting to eat this meat and have difficulty shaking such a feeling, even if you cannot articulate why.

This feeling is likely caused by an immediate, intuitive sense of its impurity. Such moral intuitions arise, MFT argues, due to a near-automatic recognition of a stimulus and activation of prior memories and associations.

This intuitive aversion to eating the roadkill deer is helpfully explained by the precursor to MFT: the Social Intuitionist Model (Haidt, 2001). The Social Intuitionist Model's central claim is that moral judgments are caused by rapid moral intuitions which, if necessary, will be followed or explained by slower, *ex post facto* reasoning (Haidt, 2001). While individuals might endorse certain moral values as paramount (e.g., a utilitarianist would argue that morality boils down to maximizing happiness for the most people), people still tend to have emotional reactions to a variety of stimuli that could not be predicted by their reasoned arguments. For example, individuals' moral judgments were found to be more accurately predicted by their emotional response to an eliciting situation than by their reasoned perceptions of the harmfulness of the behavior they are judging (Haidt & Hersh, 2001). The Social Intuitionist Model posits that individuals have intuitive emotional responses that drive a moral judgment of a behavior even when the individual is "morally dumbfounded" and unable to explain why they have judged a behavior as right or wrong (Haidt et al., 2000).

In practice, after having an initial emotional response, individuals frequently seek to explain their reaction with more careful, effortful reasoning, often proceeding as though the intuition is valid even when they cannot logically justify it. This reflects the literature in psychology distinguishing first-order automatic, intuitive judgments ("System 1 thinking") and second-order, deliberate reasoning ("System 2 thinking"; Kahneman, 2011; Sloman, 1996; Stanovich & West, 2000). Haidt (2006) compared the intuitive judgment and *post facto* reasoning about it to an elephant and a rider. The intuitive, emotional judgment is the elephant; it is powerful and strong. The rider is a *post facto* judgment; the rider, although relatively weak, can guide the elephant to one's desired goal, but only if the elephant itself does not have a particular destination in mind. When the elephant is determined, however, the rider may be ineffectual in controlling it; when moral intuitions are strongly held, even logical *post facto* reasoning may fail to change one's preferences or behavior.

Such moral intuitions are tied to memory and shaped by culture. An eliciting situation may activate different associations across different societies (Chun-Tung Lowe & Corkindale, 1998). Continuing the deer example, individuals in rural, hunting cultures may see recently killed animals more frequently and may more readily note this deer as looking similar to hunted deer that is socially acceptable to eat. But individuals in urban, non-hunting cultures may have no positive culinary associations to activate for a freshly killed deer. For example, parents of one of the authors hit and killed a deer while driving

through a rural area in Alabama. Within 15 minutes, local hunters from a nearby gas station came to the scene and asked if they could have the deer for its meat. These rural hunters were willing to eat this deer, pleased it was obtained through minimal effort, while the suburban non-hunter driver considered eating the deer to be disgusting even though, as a boy, he lived in a rural area and often ate hunted venison of similar quality. Both the driver and the hunters had implicit attitudes toward the deer, formed by their underlying cognitive associations crafted over time (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006), including (for the non-hunting driver) a reversal of a previous association whereby such a deer would be acceptably pure to eat.

Relatedly, in the Search of Associative Memory paradigm, perceiving one cue can cause individuals to more readily recall related elements (Raaijmakers & Shiffrin, 1981). The hunter can recall experiences when a freshly dead deer led to a safe and enjoyable meal, whereas the non-hunter has no such memories or associations, and instead is more likely to rely on associations with roadkill in ways that communicate its impurity. Both hunter and non-hunter are simply recognizing patterns and associations they built over a lifetime via cultural learning, but because these associations are different, they arrive at (intuitive and immediate) different moral judgments of the same situation.

Moral intuitions such as these are also a function of which mental associations are activated. Imagine two new individuals who approach the dead deer: one who is extremely hungry and one who is extremely wary of disease (e.g., because a family member is immunocompromised). Although the eliciting cue of a deceased deer is the same for both, these two individuals may form very different conclusions as to whether eating the deer is morally acceptable because their current situations guide them to draw on different associations in memory. Their perception of and behavior toward eating this deer (or other consumer behaviors) depends on the degree of congruence with their existing mental associations and representations, called schema (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Mandler, 1982).

Establishing a pattern of positive (or negative) mental associations via repeated exposure is, of course, common practice in marketing. A common maxim is that a consumer needs to see an advertisement at least seven times before the message sinks in; meta-analytical evidence supports this view, showing that both recall and positive attitudes toward ads increase with repeated exposures up to at least the eighth viewing (Schmidt & Eisend, 2015). Connecting these ideas of associative memory and repeated exposure to moral stimuli, then, is useful to understand why some intuitive responses are so deeply felt—once an association is experienced as intuitive, many of these intuitions themselves are then recognized as moral. Advertisements may try to elicit associations via pictures, sounds, or narratives that

don't mention a product's features or functionality at all. Yet such ads may be effective without making claims about how a product is better, faster, or stronger than other options. The Social Intuitionist Model, Search of Associated Memory paradigm, and MFT help to explain why such advertisements still work despite containing little information and only occupying a few seconds of attention: When ads tap into moral intuitions regarding care for one's family or protection from impurity (see Table 1 for additional examples of triggers of moral consideration), one's intuitive elephant may be powerful enough to form a moral conclusion immediately.

To summarize, moral intuitions come first in MFT; understanding the mechanics of how these intuitions are formed and how individuals react to them provides predictive validity for gauging how consumers may respond to an eliciting situation.

Pluralism: There are many psychological foundations of morality

Thus far, this review has focused on three core claims of MFT: (1) Individuals are born with a first draft of morality in their minds, (2) this first draft is then edited by cultural learning, and (3) this process crystallizes psychological systems, which produce intuitive judgments of right and wrong. We now turn to another critical argument made by MFT: moral pluralism—the idea that there are several psychological systems, rather than just one, that may be used to guide moral judgments.

Originally, MFT proposed that cultures build their moral codes and virtues by relying, to varying degrees, on five psychological foundations: Care/harm, Fairness/cheating, Loyalty/betrayal, Authority/subversion, and Purity/degradation (Graham et al., 2011). Recent work has provided evidence in favor of breaking

Fairness into distinct foundations of Equality and Proportionality, while retaining the other four (Atari et al., 2023; Meindl et al., 2019)—we follow this more modern categorization (see Table 1). The moral foundations of Care, Equality, and Proportionality allude to the protection and fair treatment of individuals and other beings, and are thus often referred to as the individualizing foundations. The Loyalty, Authority, and Purity foundations focus on the moral systems that bind individuals into larger groups and institutions, and are therefore often labeled binding foundations. Broadly speaking, these foundations map onto adaptive goals faced by modern peoples' ancestors. The recurrent encounters with challenges to each of these goals has led the human mind to develop learning modules that recognize threatening patterns in the social world and trigger the relevant intuitions to address these challenges. Though these modules emerged to deal with evolutionary threats and challenges, the patterns human minds were designed to identify from the past still influence the application of these intuitions to challenges faced in modern social life. Table 1 displays each of the moral foundations, the adaptive goals to which they are associated, as well as the challenges that historically triggered moral intuitions (original triggers/challenges) and the application of such triggers and intuitions to modern consumer behavior. Below we elaborate on each of these six moral foundations, noting that this list is by no means exhaustive, but rather those for which current empirical evidence is most robust.

Care/harm

Humans (and mammals in general) face the perennial adaptive challenge of protecting and caring for children

TABLE 1 Moral foundations.

	Adaptive goal	Original triggers/challenges	Consumer goals (and related triggers)	Associated virtues
Care/Harm	Protect and care for children	Suffering, need, distress of a child	Safety: crash-test ratings on family cars, doorbell cameras	Kindness, compassion
Equality/Inequality	Mutually beneficial partnerships	Cooperation, cheating, deception	Desire for even playing field: mobility aids for disabled, regulations to protect consumers	Impartiality, egalitarianism
Proportionality/Disproportionality	Assign appropriate rewards and punishments	Free riders	Tipping in service industries, price discrimination	Equity, work ethic
Loyalty/Betrayal	Form cohesive coalitions	Challenge or threat to the group	In-group identity signaling: fan apparel, political donations	Self-sacrifice, patriotism
Authority/Subversion	Orderly relationships in hierarchies	Power struggles, rebellion	Respect tradition and authority: nostalgia, celebrity or expert endorsements	Obedience, deference, respect for tradition
Purity/Degradation	Avoid disease and other contaminants	Waste products, contagious people	Cleanliness: organic food, chemical-free products	Temperance, piety, chastity

Source: Adapted from Graham et al. (2013).

over an extended period of time. Because human offspring are exceptionally vulnerable and must reach adulthood for the species to reproduce, mothers who could intuitively detect signs of distress and neediness in others and provide effective responses raised more children into adulthood, allowing the species to thrive. Care and protection have, thus, served a functional role in human evolution. The evolved psychological system that triggers intuitions of care, protection, compassion, and nurturance in response to signs of suffering, distress, and neediness represent the Care/harm foundation.

While the Care foundation developed from the recurrent challenge of caring for and protecting one's own children, these intuitions may also be triggered by signs of suffering in others beyond one's own offspring, including others' children, both proximate and distant adults, and even animals. This foundation leads people to avoid harming others, condemn perpetrators who cause harm, and feel compassion toward victims. Many consumer behaviors encompass caring motivations. For example, people spend large sums of money caring for their own children; one estimate holds that Americans spend approximately \$310,605 (per child) to raise their children from the day they are born to the day they turn 18 years old (Bhattarai et al., 2022). Furthermore, people often donate to organizations that provide shelter to those in need, purchase products such as diapers, hire babysitters to care for children when the parents must be absent, laud those who protect others from harm (like firefighters) as heroic, and pay a premium for products like free-range eggs that aim to reduce harm to animals. All these behaviors reflect an underlying intuition that it feels right to care for humans and other beings.

Equality/inequality

Human beings are social beings and encounter recurrent opportunities to form relationships, cooperate, and exchange goods. Throughout history, reciprocity has motivated individuals to share food in times of abundance to receive it in times of scarcity, help the sick and those in danger to receive help in the future, and exchange knowledge and goods (Trivers, 1971). Individuals whose psychological systems were better equipped to identify favorable cooperation opportunities and to detect (and punish) cheating to maintain cooperation have reaped more benefits from these relationships and developed competitive advantages.

Justice and fairness considerations manifest widely in the modern world. For example, consumers often opt out of relationships and may even spread negative information about sellers that charge prices perceived as unfair (e.g., Amazon's dynamic pricing; Xia et al., 2004). As illustrated in the opening examples, consumers often embrace fair-trade products (White et al., 2012) and are concerned with inequalities in the compensation of a

brand's employees (Paharia et al., 2013) compared with CEO pay (Mohan et al., 2018).

Proportionality/disproportionality

Although Proportionality was originally included within the same foundation as the Equality foundation, additional research has identified it as related to but distinct from Equality, although both are forms of distributive justice (Rai & Fiske, 2011; Skurka et al., 2020). While Equality is influenced by a focus on societal well-being, Proportionality is influenced by a focus on societal power (Meindl et al., 2019). Equality is best described as reciprocity and even balance in social relationships; it would entail equal treatment, equal voice, equal opportunity, and equal chance. Proportionality does not require equality in treatment or outcomes, but rather espouses the idea that in social relations, rewards and punishments for parties are proportional to their effort, costs, guilt, contribution, or merit. Proportionality argues that individuals can and should be treated quite differently from one another, if their effort or merit was itself non-equivalent. As a result, while both Equality and Proportionality are forms of distributive justice, one emphasizes parity while the other emphasizes proportional outcomes.

Loyalty/betrayal

Individuals have long lived in kin-based communities. Forming cohesive coalitions and getting along with other people provided numerous benefits. For example, groups have competed for territory and power, and being part of more cohesive groups increased the chances of succeeding in those competitions and thriving. Tasks too big for an individual to perform were also more tractable if undertaken by a group (e.g., hunting large animals), and having allies allowed individuals to pool resources and protect against dangers like famine. Thus, individuals who effectively recognized, trusted, and cooperated with in-group members, while distrusting out-group members against whom they were competing for resources, had an adaptive advantage.

Of course, individuals also rely heavily on social groups in modern life, meaning this foundation still guides many judgments and decisions. People value their in-groups, including families, friends, and even broader affiliations like countries, companies, political parties, sports teams, and brands; they praise those who sacrifice for the group and despise members who betray it, especially in times of intergroup conflict. For example, soldiers are often rewarded with medals and ceremonies for serving their country, players trash-talk their rivals (Yip et al., 2018), partisans hesitate to criticize in-group members even if they disagree

with a given position or behavior, and consumers often purchase products that speak to their group identities (e.g., US flags) while also engaging in word of mouth to recommend brands to which they are loyal (Eelen et al., 2017).

Authority/subversion

Humans have long lived in hierarchically structured social groups, where certain individuals possess higher social ranks than others. These structures have provided several benefits in human evolution, including better social coordination and incentives for group members to act in ways that benefit the group, thereby preserving social order (Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Maner & Case, 2016). Within hierarchies, it is widely recognized that having a higher (vs. lower) status is associated with a number of advantages, such as increased control over resources and higher mating chances. But people of lower ranks also accrue important benefits from these relationships. Indeed, high status individuals do enjoy prestige and privilege, but are also expected to provide protections and services to their followers (Haidt & Graham, 2007).

Individuals who were better at flexibly navigating these vertical structures could develop positive relationships both upward and downward within hierarchies. These relationships, in turn, yield both material and social benefits such as favors, exemption from punishments, and the opportunity to move upward within the hierarchies. Conversely, individuals who failed to follow social norms and disrupted the established social order were often excluded from the group (Feinberg et al., 2014; Marques et al., 2001; Stamkou et al., 2016). In the modern world, this moral foundation may be reflected in behaviors such as deferring to celebrities or experts to gain the benefit of their recommendations, engaging in traditional rituals (e.g., buying a diamond ring for engagement) to endorse social norms, and refraining from social movements such as boycotting to preserve order and avoid confrontation with authorities (e.g., the police).

Purity/degradation

As humans transitioned to larger and denser groups, which presented new challenges for communal hygiene and sanitation, and to omnivorous meat-based diets, which often included scavenged carcasses, they became more exposed to risks of pathogens and parasites. This is a critical adaptive challenge and is considered the genesis of disgust (Rozin et al., 2008), an emotion that serves as a “guardian of the body” (Haidt & Graham, 2007, p. 106) by responding to biological contaminants (e.g., feces, vomit, rotting corpses, and foods). Individuals whose behavioral immune system effectively prevented

contamination risks in their foods, relationships, and mate choices, enabling the body to remain “pure,” had an adaptive advantage. The psychological system that triggers intuitions related to purity and sanctity of one's body is referred to as the Purity/degradation foundation.

In most societies, however, the Purity/degradation foundation does not solely seek to protect from biological and contamination-related risks. It also shapes people's reactions to many phenomena encountered in social life with which one might be reluctant to be associated, such as corruption, non-conformity appearance (e.g., obesity, physical disability), non-hetero sexual orientation, and certain immigration statuses (Clifford & Wendell, 2016; Koleva et al., 2012). More directly related to consumption, disgust predicts lower intentions to buy recycled products (Meng & Leary, 2021), predicts greater rejection of food technologies (Egolf et al., 2019), and predicts hesitancy in sharing goods (Argo et al., 2006; Hazée et al., 2019; Morales & Fitzsimons, 2007). Disgust may also be triggered by exposure to counterfeit products and subsequently infect evaluations of genuine items that resemble them (Amar et al., 2018). People who score high on the Purity/degradation foundation tend to view and treat the body “as a temple” and often engage in religious practices. Many religious belief systems have explicit rules designed around purity concerns, such as kosher dietary restrictions or strict guidelines around sexual activity. Accordingly, those who endorse Purity/degradation principles also condemn behaviors that threaten this perceived sanctity, such as an inability or unwillingness to control carnal impulses.

These six foundations comprise the current set of psychological mechanisms underlying moral judgments put forth by MFT. We do not contend that these are the only and final six foundations; rather, these six seem to capture many enduring beliefs and behaviors, and seem to have lasting explanatory power. Building beyond these six foundations, scholars have been investigating additional candidate moral foundations such as liberty (Iyer et al., 2012) and ownership (Atari & Haidt, 2023). What MFT emphatically proposes is pluralism, arguing that reducing the moral domain to one single foundation does not capture the breadth of moral judgments.

This endorsement of pluralism is not without controversy; the debate over the breadth of the moral domain has dominated its field for decades. Some scholars argue that all moral judgments—even those related to questions of hierarchy, group loyalty, and purity—derive from a single psychological system (or foundation), usually represented by interpersonal harm (Gray et al., 2012) or fairness (Fitouchi et al., 2023; Kohlberg, 1971). According to this view, moral reactions to issues as varied as pricing fairness, animal welfare, corruption, prostitution, and obeying those in authority all originate in the same underlying moral system.

On the other hand, pluralist theories, such as MFT, contend that one single foundation does not explain the

breadth of moral judgments. For example, morality's evolutionary roots corroborate pluralism. Accumulated evidence suggests that responses to the many recurrent adaptive challenges humans have faced likely relied on every tool available in the human mind to identify patterns and provide effective solutions (Marcus, 2008). Different evolutionary challenges require functionally specialized psychological systems, and so it is unlikely that one single tool was built to respond to all different sorts of moral judgments (Barrett & Kurzban, 2006; Neuberg et al., 2011). Neuroscience research has provided convergent evidence for this idea. For example, Hopp et al. (2023) documented that each moral foundation elicits multiple dissociable neural representations in the brain. Cognitive processes associated with harm and impurity are themselves different, meaning (for instance) that accidental harm is judged as less morally wrong than accidental violations of purity (Young & Saxe, 2011).

MFT also helps to explain real-world judgments and behaviors. For example, even though harm or fairness considerations predict opinions over controversial political issues, such as abortion, torture, and flag protection, purity concerns independently explain these outcomes and, in fact, even outweigh harm and fairness considerations (Koleva et al., 2012). In years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, endorsement of the individualizing foundations did not predict vaccine hesitancy, whereas purity and liberty concerns were significantly associated with a reduced willingness to take vaccines (Amin et al., 2017). In the context of COVID-19, however, individualizing foundations in fact positively predicted support for vaccine passports (Harjani et al., 2023), while county-level Covid vaccination rates were negatively predicted by purity concerns and positively predicted by loyalty concerns (Reimer et al., 2022).

These different patterns across moral foundations corroborate a pluralistic approach to the moral domain. In terms of political ideology, MFT provides a simple explanation for why liberals and conservatives often cannot understand each other on moral issues—they rely on different sets of moral foundations. Liberals tend to value individualizing values more, but binding values less, than conservatives do; liberals strongly prioritize the relevance of individualizing over binding, while conservatives consider them to have much more equal relevance in decisions (Graham et al., 2009). This is not to say that either conservatives or liberals are more or less moral, or that certain foundations are more morally correct than others; rather than acting as a prescriptive theory by suggesting what values *should* be endorsed, MFT is descriptive, aiming to identify and characterize actual behaviors and judgments. Importantly, MFT research on moral stereotypes has shown that people across the political spectrum have exaggerated perceptions of the size of the moral differences between liberals and conservatives (Graham et al., 2012).

IMPLICATIONS OF MORAL FOUNDATIONS THEORY FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

As the opening examples illustrate, many—if not most—consumer behaviors entail moral considerations. Not surprisingly, research on morality has proliferated in the field over the last decades. The Journal of Consumer Psychology itself had a special issue about Marketplace Morality in April 2018 (Campbell & Winterich, 2018). While significant contributions have been made in identifying and explaining consumer moral decision-making, existing work has largely treated morality as a unidimensional construct, defined as what individuals perceive as “right” or “wrong” without systematic attempts to understand what underlies their moral judgments (Philipp-Muller et al., 2022). For example, previous research has investigated consumer responses to moral transgressions (Allard & McFerran, 2022; Chan et al., 2014; Reich et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2014) and how they respond to situations of moral ambiguity (when transgressions are not blatantly moral but may be interpreted as such; e.g., slum tourism, selfie pictures in memorials; Von Schuckmann et al., 2018). Previous work has also framed broad prosocial behaviors (e.g., charitable giving, pro-environmental actions) as “ethically moral,” arguably because such acts entail an inherent tension between self-interest and social welfare (Schwabe et al., 2018).

While these and other questions are important, the implications of MFT for the study of consumer behavior are plentiful. If consumers vary in the moral foundations they espouse, MFT offers a range of new opportunities to better understand consumer moral judgments and behaviors. For example, MFT suggests that what consumers consider “right” or “wrong” varies across cultures, and what constitutes a moral transgression in a given culture may not be so transgressive in another one. In addition, situations previously characterized as high in moral ambiguity may simply be situations that allow people to express their reliance on different moral foundations, and such different moral foundations may explain why some people find a given act repulsive whereas others do not. Also, people may vary in what they consider prosocial in the first place (e.g., compared to liberals, conservatives may not think endorsing sustainability is particularly prosocial).

More broadly, through cultural editing, MFT shows how human morality may develop to be distinct across different cultures (e.g., East vs. West) and subcultures (e.g., liberals vs. conservatives; lower- vs. higher- socioeconomic status). People may view a product, a service, a policy, or any object through specific moral lenses (i.e., moral foundations). This suggests that MFT can be leveraged for market segmentation and communication of messages tailored to different audiences. Previous research has only begun to use MFT to explain

consumer behavior. For example, scholars have recently investigated how MFT shapes boycotts and buycotts (Fernandes, 2020) and food consumption (Bretter et al., 2023; Minton et al., 2019). To demonstrate the wide-ranging value of MFT for consumer psychology, we next review research applying MFT to three consequential areas: persuasion, emotion, and prosocial behavior.

Persuasion

A rich literature has investigated the persuasiveness of personalized matching, or matching aspects of a message with those of its targets (for a review, see Teeny et al., 2021). This literature finds that messages are more likely to be persuasive when their content or the source espousing them match aspects of the target, such as shared values, goals, or affective states. Morality is another important aspect which, being core to one's identity (Strohming & Nichols, 2014), tends to align with a more central route of persuasion and has high potential for effective, durable impact (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Products vary in the degree to which consumers see them as rooted in moral issues; the more that consumers perceive that morality undergirds their attitudes toward a product, the more they seek out additional information about and purchase that product (Luttrell et al., 2021).

The insights of MFT regarding what issues people are likely to moralize, then, are valuable for promoting message effectiveness. For example, moral appeals are more effective than practical appeals for behaviors and products that are seen as morally relevant (Luttrell et al., 2019). As one example of the impact of moralization on argument persuasiveness, people who saw social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic as a moral issue saw arguments in favor of social distancing as more effective, particularly when social distancing was expressed as an other-focused behavior rather than a self-focused one (Luttrell & Petty, 2021). Related research finds that moral convictions can drive political engagement (Skitka & Bauman, 2008), and that charities can increase donations when they communicate moral values (e.g., via their mission statements) that align with the values endorsed by potential donors' political identity (Hoover et al., 2018; Winterich et al., 2012). MFT provides a framework for assessing the likely moralization of a behavior or product, generating opportunities for researchers and practitioners to align their efforts along these patterns.

Other work more directly explores the relationship between moral foundations and persuasion effectiveness. Given that liberals prioritize "individualizing" foundations (care, equality, proportionality) more, while conservatives prioritize "binding" foundations (obedience to authority, loyalty, purity) more (Graham et al., 2009), political messaging is more effective to liberals when couched in individualizing morals, but more effective to conservatives when couched in binding morals (Voelkel

& Feinberg, 2018). That is, messages that emphasize the individualizing foundations such as proportionality or care should resonate especially among liberals (Feinberg & Willer, 2013; Kidwell et al., 2013). Such effects can even shift support for candidates above and beyond political party affiliation.

Specifically, when presented with an anti-Trump message framed in loyalty terms, conservatives were less likely to support Donald Trump than when the same message was framed in fairness terms. The opposite was true for liberals when presented with anti-Clinton messages; fairness messaging made the messaging more persuasive and reduced support for Hillary Clinton more than loyalty-based messaging. Liberals were also more likely to recycle over time when presented with individualizing messages while conservatives increased recycling behavior in response to binding messages, because these morally congruent messages are perceived to be more fluent to process, generating less cognitive difficulty and more perceived legitimacy (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Feinberg & Willer, 2013, 2019; Kidwell et al., 2013). Developing such congruent messages is easier said than done, however; communicators generally craft messages aligned with their own moral values and that would be compelling to themselves, but which may be unpersuasive or even offensive to recipients (Feinberg & Willer, 2015). This highlights the importance of taking into account the moral foundations of the audience.

However, the effectiveness of moral foundations framing may vary based on the degree to which individuals are committed to a certain behavior. Take the case of using MFT framing to encourage environmental protection, a cause which conservatives generally value relatively less than liberals. Researchers used moral framing to increase pro-environmental attitudes, such as for conservatives framing it as defending the purity of nature (Feinberg & Willer, 2013). This appeal was successful, increasing conservatives' conservation intentions and attitudes, as well as donations to environmental organizations. In another study, however, liberals were not affected by framing based on individualizing moral foundations, which could indicate MFT framing may be more impactful for those who have relatively less pre-existing support for the targeted idea or behavior (Feinberg & Willer, 2015; Wolsko et al., 2016). On the other hand, both liberals and conservatives were more likely to become entrenched in pro-attitudinal perspectives when relevant moral foundations were included than to be persuaded of counter-attitudinal perspectives (Day et al., 2014).

While the preceding studies primarily focus on moral differences between political liberals and conservatives, MFT supports both broader (e.g., cross-cultural) and narrower (e.g., regional subcultural) applications. To illustrate, a messaging campaign based on a moral foundation of purity is much more aligned with the moral foundations of Egyptians than of Chileans, who

indicate very different valuations of purity; and proportionality messaging is more typically suited to Russians than to Japanese (who value that foundation less; Atari et al., 2023). Scholars and practitioners are well-advised to take into account that different cultural audiences, who vary in how much they value different moral foundations, will need messaging targeted at that culture's moral priorities. Though this could suggest that every message might need to be tailored to their audiences in a way that is inefficient or overly narrow, the nativism claim of MFT suggests that some moral messages will be broadly acceptable. For example, most cultures deem care and protection from harm as an important moral value; products and behaviors that can be framed as related to the foundation of Care can therefore be moralized more easily to resonate with a variety of audiences. Scholars and practitioners that seek to understand the persuasiveness of moral appeals, thereby, do well to consider what moral values their audiences prize.

Emotion

Emotions are primary drivers of decision-making (e.g., Keltner & Lerner, 2010; Lerner et al., 2015; Loewenstein et al., 2001) and, as such, have received substantial attention in behavioral research. Most of this work has taken a valence-based approach, examining how positive and negative emotions differentially influence judgment and decision-making (Cohen et al., 2008; Finucane et al., 2000). This tradition has typically grouped different discrete emotions into composite measures of positive and negative valence to investigate how such measures influence judgments and decisions (Andrade & Cohen, 2007). Although valence is an important feature of emotions, scholars have also documented that specific emotions of the same valence can influence judgments and decisions in starkly different ways (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Raghunathan et al., 2006; Small et al., 2006). For example, even though fear and anger are both negative emotions, the former has been associated with risk aversion and the latter with risk seeking (Lerner & Keltner, 2001). Similarly, despite being positive emotions, pride and contentment elicit preferences for different product categories: Whereas pride increases the choice of items that are useful for public display (e.g., watches and purses), contentment enhances the attractiveness of home products (e.g., beds). According to this approach, emotions developed because they have served adaptive functions throughout evolution (e.g., Giskevicius et al., 2010), such that appraisals of a given event trigger emotions that provide functionally appropriate responses (Lerner & Keltner, 2000, 2001).

Because moral foundations and emotions are both theorized to have emerged as functional responses to adaptive challenges, scholars have wondered whether there is correspondence between specific moral foundations

and specific emotions (Horberg et al., 2011; Hutcherson & Gross, 2011). The literature on moral emotions—that is, emotions that emerge in response to moral violations or that motivate moral behaviors (Haidt, 2003)—suggests that emotions can make an individual sensitive to specific types of moral concerns (Goenka & van Osselaer, 2019). For example, previous work has provided evidence that both trait and induced disgust influence judgments related to physical and spiritual purity (Horberg et al., 2009) and has suggested that purity and disgust are uniquely associated with each other (Rozin et al., 2008; Wagemans et al., 2018). By contrast, emotions such as anger and fear have not predicted such purity-related judgments, and disgust does not appear to affect moral judgments related to care and justice (Horberg et al., 2009). Furthermore, disgust has been found to predict conservative attitudes toward a range of issues, including immigration (Aarøe et al., 2017; Hodson & Costello, 2007), same-sex marriage (Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2009; Inbar, Pizarro, Knobe, et al., 2009), and abortion (Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2009; Inbar, Pizarro, Knobe, et al., 2009). Reliance on the purity foundation similarly predicted such conservative attitudes (Koleva et al., 2012), suggesting a relationship between conservatism, purity, and disgust.

Studies have also examined relationships between foundations and emotions beyond purity and disgust. For example, Goenka and van Osselaer (2019) argued that donation appeals that match the moral objective of the charity with the moral domain of the emotion are particularly effective in increasing monetary contributions. They theorized that compassion motivates people to care for those in need, whereas gratitude attunes people to fairness in relationships. Consequently, charities whose goal is to promote care (such as disaster relief) received more donations when using compassionate emotional appeals, while charities that promote fairness and equality (e.g., through the promotion of human rights) received more donations when using gratitude cues (e.g., reminding individuals of times in life when they have felt grateful) in prosocial requests. These findings suggest correspondence between emotions and moral foundations.

But other work suggests that the relationships between emotions and moral foundations may not be so clean-cut as a one-to-one correspondence. A study examining anger and contempt, in addition to disgust—the triad of negative social emotions concerning judgments of the actions of other people (Haidt, 2003)—documented that even moral violations unrelated to purity, such as embezzlement from a bank or faking an injury after car accident to collect insurance, evoked disgust. This suggests that disgust is not specific to violations of purity, but can also emerge from violations of other foundations (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011). Indeed, moral violations of not only purity (e.g., incest) but also violations of care and fairness

(e.g., corruption) have reduced subsequent oral consumption, an important marker of disgust (Chan et al., 2014). Consistent with the claim that disgust is rather general, immoral acts related to fairness elicited similar face reactions as bad tastes and disease vectors (Chapman et al., 2009).

Contrasting moral foundations with multiple moral emotions allows for a deeper understanding of whether moral violations to different foundations elicit similar or different emotional responses (Graham et al., 2009). MFT may also help explain individual differences in emotional reactions to potential moral violations. For example, some people feel disgusted by the same stimuli that may be attractive to others, such as watching mixed martial arts fights or the consumption of meat products. Likewise, some individuals laugh at jokes that others find offensive. Research suggests that when moral violations are considered to be benign, these violations may elicit amusement (McGraw & Warren, 2010). MFT can help explain why people vary in which moral violations they consider benign in the first place.

Prosocial behavior (charitable giving)

In a world plagued by natural disasters, diseases, and social inequality, charitable giving is a particularly consequential consumer behavior. Given its importance, consumer researchers have investigated individual differences in giving (Fajardo et al., 2018; Shang et al., 2020; Vieites et al., 2022) as well as tactics charities can employ to enhance donations (Goswami & Urminsky, 2016; Kessler & Milkman, 2018; Moon & VanEpps, 2023; Small & Verrochi, 2009).

Because charitable giving requires giving up one's own resources to meet the needs of someone or something else—be it a person in need, an animal, or the environment—it is often characterized as a moral behavior (Nilsson et al., 2020; Schwabe et al., 2018). As such, scholars have frequently examined the role of morality in donation decisions (Balafoutas & Rezaei, 2022; Goenka & van Osselaer, 2019; Hoover et al., 2018; Nilsson et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2007; Winterich et al., 2009, 2012, 2013). For example, in one study, moral narratives increased charitable donations relative to a control condition (Balafoutas & Rezaei, 2022). Another study suggests that appeals that emphasize moral identity (i.e., the extent to which one sees the self as moral; Aquino & Reed, 2002) influence the decision to donate (Fajardo et al., 2018). Thus, charitable giving is regarded as a moral act, and is enhanced by moral appeals.

In addition to reflecting morality, another characteristic of charitable behavior is that the motivation to give may occur intuitively. For example, research has shown that donation solicitations that identify victims of misfortune evoke more sympathy and lead to higher

donations than solicitations that do not identify victims, even if the latter solicitation benefits a larger number of individuals in need (the “identifiable victim effect”; Slovic, 2007; Small et al., 2007; Small & Verrochi, 2009). In one of these studies, participants assigned to a deliberation priming condition actually reduced overall giving, donating less to identifiable victims without increasing donations to charities that serve statistically larger populations of non-identifiable people in need (Small et al., 2007). These findings suggest that charitable behavior is both moral and frequently driven by intuitive motives.

As a theory of moral intuitions, MFT can inform research on charitable giving. It can shed light on, for example, to whom people make charitable donations. To the extent that people rely on moral foundations to varying degrees, they likely prioritize different causes based on the values they espouse. For instance, those who score high on proportionality may be particularly prone to donate to charities that provide training to talented but underprivileged individuals, allowing them to thrive by their own efforts. Individuals who espouse equality, in turn, might be particularly sensitive to basic needs and the reduction of societal inequalities. Moreover, previous research has shown that moral foundations predict donations to distant versus closer groups. Higher scores on the individualizing foundations are positively associated with allocations to causes that benefit out-groups, whereas higher scores on the binding foundations predict more in-group giving (Nilsson et al., 2016, 2020). In the context of international versus intra-national giving, Enke et al. (2022) demonstrated that moral universalists—people who prioritize individualizing over binding values (Enke, 2020)—donate less money locally, but more globally. To the extent that individualizing values espouse the protection and just treatment of individuals regardless of group membership, they may be associated with higher international giving. Binding values, in turn, entail upholding one's groups and social system, and thus are more strongly associated with stronger intra-national giving.

MFT may also enrich explanations of classic findings in the literature of charitable giving. For instance, it is widely recognized that people base their decision about giving on the extent to which the potential recipients are perceived as responsible for their plight (Katz, 1989, 1996; Lee et al., 2014). Take, for instance, an individual who receives a donation request from a homeless shelter. The individual is much more likely to donate to the shelter if they believe the recipients' conditions are due to an external factor, such as a natural disaster, than if they perceive the beneficiaries as responsible for their situation (e.g., have drug or alcohol addictions, are lazy; Katz, 1989, 1996). MFT suggests that people may arrive at the same behavioral preference through different moral intuitions. Someone who endorses proportionality may be less inclined to help the poor who were (vs. were

not) responsible for their plight because they are often not seen as contributing to the system or adding to society, rendering them undeserving of assistance.

CONCLUSION

Moving beyond the breakfast table, MFT has much to offer to the field of consumer psychology. By understanding how psychological systems have developed to deal with shared evolutionary challenges and with more unique cultural ones, we can better predict how consumers will intuitively respond to a wide range of products, services, and advertisements. Thoughtful marketers might tailor their messaging to demonstrate how a product promotes the moral principles of Care, Equality, Proportionality, Loyalty, Authority, or Purity, depending on their target audience or the intended use of their product. Consumers might also use MFT to put concepts and words to the intuitions they have long relied on, now realizing how their individual sense of right and wrong is related to others' and built on shared foundations. The daily journey of a moral consumer might start at breakfast, but with MFT as a guide, the rest of the day becomes easier to understand as well.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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