

Refining and expanding applications of Moral Foundations Theory in consumer psychology

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Abstract

We set forth an agenda for Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) research in consumer psychology, focusing in particular on four pathways: (1) factoring in multiple identities, including moral identities, to account for contextual elevation or suppression of moral foundations in predicting *which* decisions consumers moralize and *when*; (2) broadening the methodological usage of MFT to include more targeted causal research as well as expanding the utility of correlational research; (3) increasing discriminant validity between MFT and other constructs by studying moral foundations as individually manipulable and focusing on their incremental predictive validity over and above demographics and related constructs; and (4) recognizing that researcher biases regarding morality can leak into the publication process, necessitating clear distinctions between prescriptive versus descriptive research. These pathways facilitate more precise and stronger predictive validity for applying MFT in consumer psychology, yielding greater theoretical and practical utility across researcher perspectives.

KEYWORD

ethics and morality

INTRODUCTION

In a previous article we summarized the main theoretical points of Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) and outlined how the ideas of MFT could be applied in consumer research in areas such as persuasion, emotions, and charitable giving (Ramos et al., 2024). In two extremely constructive and compelling commentaries, Reed (2024) and Goenka and Thomas (2024) aptly added moral identity, heterogeneity in consumption preferences, financial choices, brand activism, and market regulation to the list of consumer-relevant phenomena influenced by moral foundations, exploring not only what has been studied already but also indicating future directions in these streams. As virtually any choice is capable of being moralized, it would be difficult to identify an area of consumer research wherein applying MFT

would not be fruitful. Instead of specifying additional consumer research areas to which to apply MFT, then, we focus the present discussion on four overarching thematic questions and issues that apply broadly across research streams, as raised by Goenka and Thomas (2024) and Reed (2024).

First, although any consumer choice could be moralized, some are more likely to be moralized than others (Graham et al., 2013). Our focus is not whether consumers moralize their decisions, but rather *which* decisions they are most likely to moralize, *when*, and *to what extent*. In this paper, we discuss Reed's excellent points that competing identities, including moral ones, can both elevate and suppress the impact of moral foundations on a given consumer behavior, yielding predictions about when certain moral foundations might be given greater decision weight than others in making

Wayne Johnson and Guilherme A. Ramos contributed equally to the manuscript.

Accepted by David B. Wooten, Editor; Associate Editor, Kathleen Vohs.

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choices. Agreeing with Reed's pluralistic approach to identities, as well as the ways in which different identities shift in their salience depending on the context, we also extend Reed's work by highlighting how moral foundations may relate to other, non-moral identities, predicting choices that may not initially appear morally relevant.

Second, we both encourage the broader use of correlational research and provide recommendations for causal experiments for moral foundations in consumer psychology. Correlational MFT work can identify clear, predictable consumer patterns and priorities, which may in turn lead to new insights for additional consumer research to investigate. Such correlational work should be a valuable tool in the toolkit of consumer researchers and moral psychologists alike, rather than restricted to certain journals or sub-fields. We also propose that future investigations of MFT will benefit from extending beyond correlational methods as well. Although the vast majority of prior generations of MFT research have used correlational methodologies – namely, capturing stable individual differences using the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ; Graham et al., 2011) or its modern instantiation, the MFQ-2 (Atari et al., 2023) – more recent work has emphasized experimental methods such as framing interventions to examine causal relationships (e.g., Feinberg & Willer, 2013, 2015). Progress from prediction to explanation to control is a well-worn path for scientific inquiry: to begin with qualitative and theoretical contributions, then transition to identifying correlational patterns, and follow such pattern identification with causal experiments. This shift from correlational to causal research – though it need not be total – is already underway and well facilitated by a strong, mature foundation of prior MFT research.

Third, Goenka and Thomas demonstrate that common approaches in moral foundations research have often separated the foundations into a dichotomy of individualizing values (Care, Equality, and Proportionality) and binding values (Loyalty, Authority, and Purity), noting that this dichotomy can undermine discriminant validity in MFT by overlapping with existing constructs. In recognizing the validity of this point, we discuss a growing stream of research that studies individual moral foundations as discrete variables. This more fine-grained approach allows for greater precision and is likely the future of MFT research, especially given recent work that finds the binary grouping of binding-individualizing values does not apply in many non-US cultural contexts (Atari et al., 2023). We also note the importance of continuing to test the moral foundations' incremental predictive validity over and above demographics (ideology, religiosity) and related constructs (e.g., Right Wing Authoritarianism, Social Dominance Orientation).

Fourth, we discuss a challenge noted by Goenka and Thomas that is grounded not in the theory or execution of moral foundations research, but rather in our human

tendencies as researchers: a propensity by researchers to impose their own normative beliefs on their work. To illustrate, previous traditions (e.g., Kohlberg, 1969, 1971; Turiel, 1983) reserved the word “moral” for concerns about which researchers normatively agreed, but not contrasting views, placing their personal normative perspectives atop a moral hierarchy. However, individuals often do not agree normatively and arbitrating such disagreements ventures more into philosophy than science. We therefore echo Goenka and Thomas' call for reviewers to suspend their normative views in evaluating the descriptive merits of papers and that authors state when their research is descriptive versus prescriptive (Graham, 2014). In some cases, it may also be constructive for authors to identify the normative moral assumptions they make, a task facilitated by MFT. We also recommend more precise language for authors to mitigate bias and misperceptions.

INTEGRATING MORAL FOUNDATIONS THEORY AND MORAL IDENTITY

What individuals moralize, *when* they moralize, and *to what extent* they do so has crucial implications for consumer psychology. MFT provides insight into *what* people moralize, noting care, equality, proportionality, loyalty, authority, and purity are foundational moral values across cultures. Reed (2024) enriches this perspective by arguing a person's multiple identities greatly influence the conditions under which people rely on a given foundation and to what degree.

Consider a sporting event. MFT predicts that attendees will desire equal treatment from the referee and penalties proportional to offenses, support calls that benefit their team, feel concern for injured players, mostly obey stadium signs and officials, and expect sanitary restrooms. They will prefer to buy merchandise from their team, such as a jersey from a high-status player. They will find fresher-looking concessions more appealing and feel displeasure if judging prices to be disproportional or if receiving a smaller portion than others for the same price. This is likely the *what* of their consumption as projected by MFT.

While these projections are valuable, our picture of attendee consumption is incomplete. Which factors predict who will buy each team's apparel? How much will they pay and when will they pay more versus less? These questions are helpfully addressed by Reed's pluralistic conceptualization of identity. A local resident is likely to identify with the home team as an ingroup. The longer they have lived there or the more ties they have (i.e., the stronger their city resident identity), the more likely they are to prefer the home team's merchandise with a likely higher willingness-to-pay. Suppose a close friend plays for the other team, causing a conflict within the loyalty

foundation between one's identities as a friend and as a city resident; the more salient identity should have a larger impact on behavior. When the friend is playing, the "friend" identity is likely salient to suppress purchase and use of the home team's merchandise. But when the game is against a different visiting team, the resident identity is likely to take precedence and elevate the home team merchandise again. If the visiting team is a fierce rival whose victory poses an identity threat, we would expect the resident's merchandise purchases and willingness to pay to increase further (Kilduff et al., 2010; Pike et al., 2018). We could expect similar effects any time the identity as a sports fan or city resident were particularly salient, such as in the aftermath of a city tragedy that unifies its population (Reed et al., 2012). These identity factors help project *when* consumption occurs and *to what extent*.

We agree with Reed that pluralistic identities can greatly influence whether to elevate or suppress the enactment of moral foundations. For example, people who endorse the binding moral foundations tend to protect and favor their in-group, but a strong moral identity leads them to extend this moral concern to out-groups as well (Smith et al., 2014). We also endorse his arguments that identity salience shifts with contextual factors. Furthermore, we build on Reed's structure by noting that there are likely several overlapping relationships between moral foundations and moral identities. Both MFT and moral identity are pluralistic, multi-dimensional approaches that recognize that individuals' moral considerations can involve values that both reinforce and compete with one another. Moral foundations shape basic ways in which individuals see their world, such as to whom or what they attribute outcomes (Niemi et al., 2023). As noted previously (Ramos et al., 2024), moral foundations are not the final structures a society or individual builds, but they are the foundations that constrain which structures can be built.

We therefore do not believe that any of a person's identities can be fully siloed from their moral foundations, given that those identities may have been facilitated or developed through choices built on moral foundations. Reed gives examples of individuals at work or volunteering at shelters, situations in which behaviors are conditioned upon identities that are most salient in those contexts. These identities are often related to moral foundations, such as the importance of care (e.g., the volunteer-care link in Reed's figure 1). We would say that identities ultimately relate to moral foundations even in cases where one's moral identity may feel weaker or less salient, such as the sports analogy wherein many people would think of other identities as more prominent than their moral identity. Yet even in that situation, moral considerations (loyalty to one's team or city, desire for proportionality in refereeing decisions) help to compose people's identities

(here, what kind of sports fan they are) and shape their behavior.

Returning to Reed's helpful figure 1, we can imagine more links between foundations and identities other than the link directly through moral identity, such as loyalty's role in national or ethnic identities, and authority's role in social hierarchy status identities. For instance, one who values loyalty to a city or team may have been more likely to become a fan in the first place, developing the fan identity. This identity in turn influences the experience of being a fan, such as enjoyment derived from seeing one's team win or talking about the team with other fans. Thereby, we posit a relationship between moral foundations, multiple identities, and consumer behavior, even when moral identity is not salient.

Future research should examine the interaction, limitations, and contributions of moral identity versus moral foundations in predicting consumer behavior. Controlled experiments investigating causality are well suited to this purpose. Most work investigating interactions of moral identity and moral foundations (e.g., Smith et al., 2014) has been correlational, and determining which construct is conceptually prior is somewhat of a chicken-and-egg question. Experimental manipulations priming moral foundations (e.g., Mooijman et al., 2018, Studies 7–9) or moral identity (Aquino et al., 2007, Study 2) can uncover causal pathways from one to another; we expect that such pathways will prove to be bidirectional. This is just one area where we see experimental work furthering morality research, as we discuss in the next section.

DEMONSTRATING MFT IN BOTH EXPERIMENTAL AND CORRELATIONAL RESEARCH

Our target article (Ramos et al., 2024) was partly motivated by the desire for consumer psychology research to more broadly integrate advances in the moral psychology literature. Specifically, consumer research has largely studied morality in the marketplace by treating morality as a unidimensional construct. In so doing, the field has overlooked recent advances in moral psychology research that approach morality as a pluralistic set of moral intuitions – an idea embodied by MFT. In their commentary, Goenka and Thomas (2024) make the case that the separation between consumer psychology and moral psychology goes beyond conceptual differences and also comprises methodological differences. The authors correctly point out that the overwhelming majority of research on MFT is correlational, whereas consumer research has prioritized experimental demonstrations of causal effects instead. Arguing that it is challenging to manipulate the moral foundations in assessing causal effects, Goenka and Thomas (2024) urge consumer researchers (and consumer research journals) to embrace correlational evidence in studies investigating MFT.

While we voice our support for consumer psychology to be more open to correlational evidence, especially given the importance of studying individual differences when understanding the relationship between morality and consumer behavior, we also believe that moral psychology could borrow from consumer research and benefit from more experimental work to cleanly test causal relationships.

First, we argue that consumer psychology should extend beyond an overreliance on experimental studies to investigate cause-and-effect relationships. Scholars have argued that other types of analyses would help bring relevance to marketing research (MacInnis et al., 2020). For example, observational studies and field experiments provide convincing evidence that effects hold outside tightly controlled settings, and such generalizability may be essential to demonstrating the real-world relevance of research findings. Correlational research showing clear patterns also has great value. Mainstream consumer behavior journals have mostly been open to correlational studies when, within the same article, they set the stage to at least one follow-up causal study manipulating the variable of interest. This is a valuable approach, but holding every investigation to the standard of strict causal evidence may leave hidden many relevant patterns that are real and consequential for practitioners. This concern about the omission of phenomena from empirical investigation is especially relevant to research examining variables that are difficult to experimentally manipulate (e.g., individual differences), but still relevant to marketers (e.g., because individual differences allow for segmentation). For example, it may be interesting to practitioners to know how female versus male individuals react to different campaigns without the need of causal evidence for the effect of gender. Likewise, learning that people with specific moral values are hesitant to adopt conspicuous or sensory consumption helps managers better segment their market, regardless of the exact causal relationship between these particular values (or closely related ones) and their rejection of these kinds of products (Goenka & Thomas, 2020, 2023). Accepting a wider array of methodological approaches fosters continued relevance for consumer research, and we echo previous calls for consumer psychologists to be more open to correlational research, including when studying MFT.

However, we also believe that moral psychology would benefit from additional causal demonstrations. Most of the extant research on MFT has applied the Moral Foundations Questionnaires (Atari et al., 2023; Graham et al., 2011) and correlated responses to consequential outcomes (e.g., support for policy issues; Koleva et al., 2012). Although this approach has provided important insights to moral psychology and helped popularize MFT in the field, the theory is now at a stage where showing causality should be prioritized, and consumer researchers may have the methodological expertise and creativity to design experiments where causal

relationships can be tested. While attempting to manipulate one's moral foundations can be challenging, there are several other ways of conducting causal research using MFT. For instance, past research has investigated whether moral framing – that is, framing a message in terms of different moral foundations – promotes persuasion (e.g., Day et al., 2014; Feinberg & Willer, 2013, 2015; Kidwell et al., 2013; Winterich et al., 2012). In the domain of environmental attitudes, Feinberg and Willer (2013) demonstrated that while most environmental messages have been framed in terms of care/harm, framing such messages in terms of purity/degradation increased support for environmental initiatives among moderates and conservatives. Winterich et al. (2012) showed similar results in the context of charitable giving: Liberals were more likely to make donations when appeals highlighted the individualizing foundations, whereas conservatives were more responsive to appeals that highlighted the binding foundations. Future studies could apply the principles of moral framing when investigating outcomes, such as boycotts of particular brands, product types, or food choices (e.g., receptiveness to genetically modified foods).

Further, experiments could investigate social judgments, or how people react to someone else's behaviors that may transgress different moral foundations. For instance, recent work that has examined conflicts between moral considerations asked participants to judge witnesses who decided to either blow the whistle or not in the service of loyalty (Hildreth, 2024; Berry et al., 2021, 2023; Dungan et al., 2019; Waytz et al., 2013). Similarly, Hart et al. (2024) investigated people's reactions to decisions to reveal others' secrets, showing that those who do so are evaluated as more honest but less loyal than those who do not. Each of these behaviors (e.g., blowing the whistle vs. not blowing the whistle) transgress different moral foundations (e.g., fairness vs. loyalty), and may give rise to different reactions depending on one's own moral values. These reactions, in turn, can have downstream consequences in real life, such as in decisions to retaliate or intentions to establish friendship with the whistleblower, and experimental work is properly positioned to understand how conflicts between moral foundations affect behaviors. Another promising line of work is to investigate additional foundations. For instance, scholars could examine how equality and proportionality shape social judgments of luxury consumption (Lee et al., 2018). People who place a high value on proportionality may have more positive views of someone who consumes luxury goods relative to people who place more of an emphasis on equality.

In sum, while we recognize the value of correlational studies and call for consumer research to be more open to this kind of work, we propose that the next generation of MFT research should also incorporate experimental work to identify causal relationships – as long as the pursuit of causality does not limit relevance.

DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY IN MFT

In their commentary, Goenka and Thomas argue that another key challenge for MFT is establishing discriminant validity between the moral foundations and other existing psychological constructs. It has been argued, for example, that the individualizing foundations essentially reflect acceptance of equality and low levels of Social Dominance Orientation (the belief in the superiority of one's group; Pratto et al., 1994), whereas the binding foundations reflect resistance to change and right-wing authoritarianism (the extent to which one submits to authority and adheres to conventional norms; Altemeyer, 1998; Federico et al., 2013; Guidetti et al., 2021; Kugler et al., 2014). In fact, both of these scales (among many others) have been used as predictive validity criteria in construction of moral foundation measures (Atari et al., 2023; Graham et al., 2011). To the extent that attempts to integrate MFT into consumer psychology might be received with similar criticisms, we agree it is worthwhile to clarify these relationships.

Part of the criticism on discriminant validity that MFT has received stems from previous research studying political differences. For example, conservatives value the binding moral foundations more than liberals, whereas liberals value the individualizing foundations more than conservatives (Graham et al., 2009). But conservatives also score higher on right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation relative to liberals (Jost et al., 2009). It is thus unclear whether it is moral values or other individual differences that underlie political divisions. Addressing this question, previous work has empirically examined the relationships between political ideology, moral foundations, and personality variables representing resistance to change and authoritarianism (Federico et al., 2013; Kugler et al., 2014; Milojev et al., 2014; Sinn & Hayes, 2017; Yilmaz & Saribay, 2019). For example, Kugler et al. (2014) demonstrated that political differences in binding and individualizing moral foundations are statistically mediated by authoritarianism and social dominance orientation. However, Yilmaz and Saribay (2019) found that moral foundations explain unique variance in political differences over and above these personality factors.

But past work in moral psychology has also considered all moral foundations as separable constructs, and in so doing, revealed more interesting and nuanced relationships than would arise had it only considered a binary split of binding versus individualizing moral foundations. For example, over and above ideology, religiosity, and other moral foundations, endorsement of the purity foundation is a powerful predictor of anti-vaccination attitudes (Amin et al., 2017) and behaviors (Reimer et al., 2022), conservative attitudes in culture war issues (Koleva et al., 2012), prevalence of hate

groups and hate speech (Hoover et al., 2021), victim-blaming (Dodson et al., 2023), and anti-outgroup violent rhetoric (Graham et al., 2023; Kennedy et al., 2023). Other work has focused on the incremental predictive validity of the moral foundations over and above related constructs such as the Schwartz Values Scale (Graham et al., 2011). Further, Reimer et al. (2022) found that county-level COVID-19 vaccination rates were negatively predicted by endorsement of the purity foundation but positively predicted by endorsement of loyalty. Both purity and loyalty are binding foundations, and yet identifying them as separate constructs revealed distinct relationships with behavior. These findings suggest that, in integrating MFT, consumer psychology should move beyond the binding versus individualizing divide to investigate individual foundations. In many instances, we agree that it is a challenge to disentangle moral foundations from related constructs. In moving the field forward, however, studying individual foundations (rather than a binary dichotomy of foundations), and focusing on the incremental predictive validity of MFT's constructs over and above related constructs, will help address this challenge.

OBJECTIVITY IN WRITING AND REVIEWING MFT RESEARCH

Authors tend to overestimate how much others share their assumptions, causing blindspots and communicative dysfunction between themselves and readers (Cronin & Weingart, 2007; Pronin et al., 2004) that can hinder research progress. To illustrate, consider challenges arising from how “moral” and “morality” can be used normatively/prescriptively to describe something that is morally good which others should promote and protect, but they can also be used descriptively, as in scientific descriptions of the domains and processes of human morality. MFT's initial lack of clarity about whether “moral” was meant descriptively or prescriptively led to valid criticisms that calling loyalty, authority, and purity “moral” could legitimize excesses of these as normatively positive (Graham, 2014; Jost, 2009; Kugler et al., 2014). This is why MFT researchers have long sought to clarify that MFT is descriptive, not prescriptive:

Jost (2009)... raised the normative objection that calling Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity “moral” could legitimize anything from jingoism to blind obedience to prejudice and racism. Jost's objection raises a valid critique of some of our writings (Haidt, 2007; Haidt & Graham, 2007) that blurred the line between the descriptive and the normative and highlights the importance of carefully distinguishing the two.

MFT is designed to provide a purely descriptive understanding of human morality, not to provide any normative justification (or condemnation) of any particular moral judgments or concerns. Although the word “moral” can introduce ambiguities because it has both descriptive and normative uses, MFT is about the foundations of morality as it is observed around the world, not about the moral systems that ought to prevail (Graham et al., 2013).

We think it is important in many fields for researchers to similarly clarify what is descriptive and what is prescriptive, not just in applied fields of research like prejudice reduction, public health, or social justice research, but in areas like consumer psychology as well. As Goenka and Thomas note, descriptive work showing how moral foundations uniquely predict behaviors like getting vaccinated or purchasing GMO products can be useful regardless of one's normative stance on those behaviors. We note that our arguments highlighting MFT's utility to consumer psychology, such as pointing out the efficacy of moral framing, are descriptive and emphatically not a prescription for manipulation of consumer moral sensibilities. Along these same lines, we also recommend greater precision in the language and constructs used in moral foundations research. Rather than call a behavior “moral,” which could have a prescriptive sheen even if description is intended, researchers ought to specify the relevant moral foundation such as “loyal behavior” or “proportional values.” Conversely, if writing normatively, such as arguing that GMOs are good for society, we propose authors explicitly detail the assumptions on which they base their definition of “good.”

Going further, we see a primary scientific benefit of MFT in understanding how intuitive moral values and convictions can predict beliefs and behaviors such as authoritarianism, system justification, prejudice, violence, and even genocide. Human morality, like all aspects of human nature, is not always normatively good; rather, it reflects human values in a given place, time, and context. As noted above, MFT attempts to measure and describe the full range of moral concerns people have, which we see as a scientific step beyond previous treatments of morality (e.g., Kohlberg, 1969, 1971; Turiel, 1983) that only considered moral concerns with which the scientists normatively agreed. For instance, Graham and Haidt (2012) make the point that *all* moral concerns can be dangerous, and can lead to violence in the service of protecting some morally sacred object, person, or idea. While MFT can be useful for normative goals such as increasing vaccination rates, reducing discrimination and sexual harassment, and decreasing political partisanship, it is important to draw a clear line between these normative

goals and the descriptive account of human morality that MFT provides.

CONCLUSION

We express our profound appreciation and respect for the valuable commentaries offered by our colleagues Shreyans Goenka, Manoj Thomas, and Americus Reed II. They have highlighted clear pathways to improve the applicability of Moral Foundations Theory, both expanding its scope while refining its predictive validity. We build on the challenges highlighted in their commentaries to guide future research directions, aiming to foster greater predictive and discriminant validity, theoretical richness, construct clarity, methodological diversity, and objectivity for MFT research in consumer psychology.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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How to cite this article: Johnson, W., Ramos, G. A., VanEpps, E. M., & Graham, J. (2024). Refining and expanding applications of Moral Foundations Theory in consumer psychology. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 34, 670–677. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1442>