

A Literature Review of Moral Licensing Theory

Xin Rao *

College of Economics and Management, Southwest Petroleum University, Chengdu, China

*Corresponding Author: Xin Rao

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews moral licensing theory by examining its origin, development, core concepts, theoretical models, moderating variables, applications, and future trends. The theory originated in early research on moral psychology. Early studies focused on social discrimination, and later research extended the theory to multiple domains. Its core idea is that prior moral behavior may create a psychological tendency to relax moral constraints in subsequent behavior. This review also discusses the theory's explanatory models, forms of licensing, extended research fields, and future directions, with the aim of deepening understanding of the decision-making mechanisms underlying human moral behavior.

KEYWORDS

Moral licensing theory; Moral credits model; Moral credentials model; Moderating variables

1. INTRODUCTION

In everyday life, we often observe a familiar phenomenon. After taking part in a large-scale tree-planting activity, some people may believe that they have already made a substantial contribution to environmental protection. Later, they may use environmentally unfriendly products more often, such as plastic bowls or disposable chopsticks. Such cases are common in the real world. This pattern of 'doing good first and doing bad later' has prompted scholars to investigate its underlying causes. Psychologists therefore proposed the concept of moral licensing, arguing that people may obtain a sense of moral license from prior moral behavior and consequently relax their standards in later choices.

As an important concept in social psychology, moral licensing theory has attracted broad scholarly attention since it was proposed. The theory seeks to explain how individuals choose between moral and immoral behavior, and how moral standards operate in that process. It therefore helps scholars understand moral behavior, self-control, and decision-making mechanisms. This review summarizes the origin, core concepts, major findings, applications, and development of moral licensing theory across different fields. Through a synthesis of the relevant literature, it presents the current state and future trends of the theory, with the aim of providing a comprehensive reference for further academic discussion and practical application.

2. ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF MORAL LICENSING THEORY

Moral licensing theory can be traced to early research in moral psychology. Its emergence was closely related to deeper social reflection on moral behavior and decision-making. As society developed, people gradually realized that behavior in moral situations is not always consistent over time. It may

be guided and constrained by multiple moral standards. For example, after maintaining a healthy diet for a week, a person may be more likely to overeat or make unhealthy dietary choices later. This seemingly contradictory behavior led scholars to examine the mechanisms of moral decision-making and contributed to the emergence of moral licensing theory. The phenomenon also suggests that good and evil in daily life are not sharply separated, and that people's moral standing develops dynamically.

In 1990, Nisan studied moral balance and showed that people tend to maintain a moral equilibrium. They evaluate their past behavior to judge whether they have reached that state of balance. When individuals feel that they have already performed a certain number of moral acts, the inner discomfort associated with immoral behavior may be reduced. Nisan referred to this phenomenon as moral credits [1].

Early research on moral licensing mainly focused on preliminary observations of social discrimination. In a study by Monin and Miller (2001), White participants were asked whether Whites or Blacks were more suitable for police work, or whether both were equally suitable. At the beginning of the experiment, participants were told that police work required honesty and integrity, but that police groups often held hostile attitudes toward Black people [2]. The researchers then asked participants to choose one of four candidates as a formal police officer under two scenarios: one scenario included one Black candidate and three White candidates, while the other included four White candidates. The results showed that participants who selected a Black candidate in the first scenario were more likely to select a White candidate in the second. The authors therefore argued that when individuals perform well on one moral dimension, they may lower their moral constraints in later behavior and become more likely to act immorally. This finding laid an empirical foundation for moral licensing theory. Effron, Cameron, and Monin (2009) later conducted a similar study in the context of the 2008 U.S. presidential election, linking support for Barack Obama with choices in police hiring. They found that only participants who had expressed support for Obama were more likely to state that Whites were more suitable for police work. This may be because expressing support for Obama provided evidence that they were not racist, thereby licensing them to express the view that Whites were more suitable for the police position [3]. Valentino et al. (2011) found that in community or political groups, when individuals believed that their own racist attitudes had declined by an average of 10%, opposition to welfare proposals for Black people instead increased. This indicates that group members may more easily obtain moral license, which can increase discriminatory behavior [4]. One possible reason is that, in group settings, members are affected by multiple factors and may develop an illusion of moral balance, which provides moral support for 'doing good first and doing bad later.'

As scholars further explored moral licensing theory, the scope of research expanded from social discrimination to other social domains. Effron et al. (2010) examined moral licensing from the perspective of prosocial behavior and found that people who had previously expressed non-discriminatory attitudes reduced their prosocial behavior to some extent [5]. Mullen and Murnighan's (2010) research on helping behavior also showed that, compared with participants who recorded their daily lives, those who focused on describing their own helping behavior showed lower willingness to participate in subsequent helping tasks such as volunteering and blood donation.

Many scholars have also applied moral licensing theory to social consumption. Khan et al. (2005) found that asking people to recall good deeds they had done made them more likely to prefer luxury goods over items they actually needed in subsequent consumption [6]. Chinese scholars have also contributed to the extension of moral licensing theory. Shi Zhuomin et al. (2023) used three experiments to show that, compared with conventional consumption, green consumption increases individuals' subsequent tendency toward excessive consumption and unconsciously rationalizes that behavior, causing consumers to fall into a 'green consumption trap' [7].

3. CORE CONCEPTS AND CONNOTATIONS OF MORAL LICENSING THEORY

Moral licensing refers to the psychological feeling of being licensed after an individual has performed behavior that conforms to moral standards. This feeling allows the individual to relax constraints on immoral behavior in subsequent situations and to display behavioral tendencies that are inconsistent with prior moral conduct. Merritt defines moral licensing as a tendency for people to draw confidence from past moral behavior when they hesitate about whether future behavior is moral, thereby increasing the likelihood of later immoral behavior. This sense of license is not based on actual moral 'points' or 'immunity.' It is a subjective psychological cognition. Individuals believe that they have obtained the right to deviate from moral standards through earlier moral behavior, which may produce moral slippage in later action.

From a psychological perspective, moral behavior activates individuals' moral self-cognition and leads them to view themselves as moral persons in a social sense. This positive self-cognition generates positive psychological feedback. Such feedback includes not only satisfaction and achievement arising from meeting moral requirements, but also the anticipated recognition and respect of others in social interaction. When facing later behavioral choices, individuals often unconsciously draw on this positive psychological cognition and attempt to rationalize possible immoral behavior. This occurs because individuals construct a psychological framework of their own image and overestimate the capacity of their positive social image. They may believe that occasional minor moral deviations do not damage their overall good image, and therefore use accumulated positive self-cognition to justify later misconduct. In this way, a complex mechanism linking moral behavior and licensing is formed. This mechanism reflects subtle psychological changes in moral judgment and behavioral choice.

4. THEORETICAL MODELS OF MORAL LICENSING

With the deepening of research on moral licensing theory, scholars have developed a richer understanding of the moral licensing effect. Current research usually explains it through the moral credits model and the moral credentials model.

According to Miller and Effron, the moral credits model means that an immoral act can be socially accepted if it is offset by the moral reputation accumulated through past behavior. In their view, this moral reputation operates as a form of moral asset, whereas the consequences of immoral behavior constitute moral debt [8]. Stone et al. (2009) later used a more vivid metaphor, 'moral currency,' to explain the model. A person's moral credits can be understood as a bank account. Compliance with rules is equivalent to making deposits, while rule-breaking and immoral behavior are equivalent to withdrawals. As long as there are enough 'moral deposits' to balance the 'moral debt' after a violation, doing something bad may be considered acceptable [9].

The moral credits model has a distinctive feature: whether a person has moral credits is crucial for committing an immoral act. It determines whether the person can use previously accumulated moral credits to rationalize the behavior. Moral credits therefore become one factor that people consider when deciding whether to do something that society generally regards as immoral.

The moral credentials model explains moral licensing theory from a perspective different from the moral credits model. It holds that after individuals do something that meets social moral requirements, they obtain a form of self-recognized credential, which then licenses their later immoral behavior. This process differs from the moral credits model, which compares good deeds to moral currency. Instead, the moral credentials model uses previously obtained moral credentials to blur the moral meaning of later immoral behavior, making individuals less able to perceive that behavior as immoral.

In summary, although both the moral credits model and the moral credentials model explain moral licensing theory, they differ in three respects. First, they differ in the way licensing is achieved. The credits mechanism depends on a moral balance between prior and later behavior, whereas the credentials mechanism grants license through an attribution process. Second, the two mechanisms license different types of behavior. The credits mechanism mainly concerns clear moral violations, in which the actor knows that the target behavior conflicts with social norms. Under the credentials mechanism, however, the moral status of the target behavior is more ambiguous. It may be seen either as morally acceptable or as violating moral standards. Third, the two mechanisms differ in whether the licensing effect declines as the target behavior occurs. In the moral credits mechanism, once immoral behavior occurs, the previously accumulated 'moral capital' is continuously depleted until moral balance is restored. Therefore, the number of target behaviors it can license is limited [10].

5. MODERATING VARIABLES OF MORAL LICENSING

Research on moral licensing theory and its effects is not limited to applications. Scholars also examine what factors influence moral licensing and what moderating variables shape the effect. The following discussion introduces two moderating variables: construal level and the cost of moral behavior.

According to construal level theory, when individuals have a higher level of construal, their understanding and simulation of the initial moral behavior are significantly enhanced, which in turn promotes moral consistency. This suggests that when individuals have a higher level of interpretive ability, moral licensing may arise more easily. In other words, if individuals can accurately describe their initial moral behavior through a strong level of understanding, their subsequent behavior is often more consistent with moral norms and displays a pattern that conforms to moral standards [11]. Conway and Peets (2012) found that individuals' level of understanding of their past moral behavior affects the emergence of the moral licensing effect. In their experiment, participants recalled moral events from one year earlier or one week earlier [12]. The results showed that participants who recalled moral events from one year earlier were more likely to participate in current social volunteering, whereas those who recalled moral events from one week earlier chose to reduce social activity in the short term. The authors argued that people tend to use abstract thinking when recalling distant events, while they focus more on details when recalling recent events. This higher construal level makes moral licensing more likely.

Gneezy et al. (2012) found that the cost of behavior can also moderate moral licensing. Specifically, when individuals engage in moral behavior that requires a certain cost, they develop a stronger sense of moral identification and greater confidence in the moral principles they hold [13]. This psychological state encourages them to show more stable and firm moral beliefs in later decisions. Its purpose is to maintain the moral standard system they follow and ensure that their behavior remains within the framework of moral norms. In practice, the cost of behavior can moderate moral licensing because it creates a sense of responsibility. Under normal circumstances, people are willing, and even inclined, to assume responsibility, which encourages morally consistent behavior.

6. APPLICATIONS AND RESEARCH FINDINGS IN DIFFERENT FIELDS

In consumer behavior research, moral licensing theory is widely used to explain changes in consumer behavior after purchasing green, environmentally friendly, or prosocial products with moral attributes. Wu Bo, Dong Jin, and colleagues (2016) found that consumers who had previously purchased green products were more likely to stop purchasing green products later [14]. In other words, after purchasing such products, consumers may develop moral license, thereby increasing their willingness or actual behavior to purchase products without moral attributes, such as high-energy-consuming or unsustainable products. Current consumer research on moral licensing theory pays particular attention

to green product consumption. This phenomenon is known as the 'moral licensing effect in green consumption.'

In the workplace, moral licensing theory is used to study employees' moral decision-making and behavior. He Peixu et al. (2023) found that employees who engage in helping behavior are more likely to remain silent later rather than continue helping [15]. Zhang Bainan and Xu Shiyong (2024) found that employees may believe that previous good deeds have added 'points' to their moral account, and that they can spend these 'points' to engage in deviant behavior that harms the organization or others in later work [16]. These studies offer warnings for human resource management and the construction of ethical culture in enterprises. Firms need to establish sound moral supervision and incentive mechanisms, avoid the negative effects of moral licensing on organizational performance and team climate, and strengthen employees' comprehensive understanding of professional ethical standards through continuous ethics education and training.

7. CONCLUSION

This review systematically examined the origin, development, theoretical models, moderating variables, applications, and future research directions of moral licensing theory. Overall, moral licensing theory provides an important explanation for why individuals may engage in less moral behavior after prior moral actions. Existing studies show that this effect can be explained mainly through the moral credits model and the moral credentials model, and that its occurrence may be influenced by factors such as construal level and the cost of moral behavior.

The review also indicates that moral licensing theory has been widely applied in fields such as consumer behavior, green consumption, workplace behavior, and prosocial decision-making. These applications demonstrate the theoretical value and practical relevance of moral licensing in explaining inconsistent moral behavior.

However, existing research still has some limitations. First, most studies focus on the negative consequences of moral licensing, while relatively less attention has been paid to intervention strategies. Second, cross-cultural differences in moral licensing remain insufficiently explored. Third, the integration of moral licensing theory with related fields such as organizational behavior and neuroscience still needs further development. Future research should therefore pay more attention to cross-cultural comparison, interdisciplinary explanation, and practical interventions to reduce the negative effects of moral licensing.

In conclusion, moral licensing theory offers a valuable perspective for understanding the dynamic nature of moral decision-making. By clarifying its theoretical mechanisms and application boundaries, future studies can further enrich the explanation of moral behavior and provide more effective guidance for individual and social moral practice.

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