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**Dissociation of morality and performance:
Essays on the concept of moral decoupling**

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vorgelegt von
M.Sc. Rebekka Böhm
aus Simmerath

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Dekan:	Prof. Dr. Tim Diekötter
1. Berichterstatter:	Prof. Dr. Ulrich Orth
2. Berichterstatter:	Prof. Dr. Stefan Hoffmann
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Summary

Reasons for consumers' immoral and environmentally unfriendly behavior have long been of interest for society and researchers alike (Carrington et al., 2010). One possible explanation for why consumers engage in those behaviors even though they are aware of the immorality of them, lies in the concept of moral decoupling. Moral decoupling can be defined as a psychological reasoning process in which consumers dissociate judgments of performance from judgments of morality (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013). Extensive studies have examined moral decoupling (Fehr et al., 2019; Haberstroh et al., 2017), however, research on moral decoupling in the context of consumer-level everyday moral transgressions and sustainability has been scarce.

In order to examine why and when consumers dissociate between performance and morality judgments the current dissertation presents six empirical research papers in which the proposed effects are tested across different contexts (COVID-19 (*Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3*), Russian invasion of Ukraine (*Chapter 3* and *Chapter 7*), visually sustainable design (*Chapter 4*), and plastic usage (*Chapter 5* and *Chapter 6*)). Additionally, the model of moral decoupling is tested in different constellations, including various additional factors driving consumer decision-making

Chapter 1 introduces the topic of the dissertation, explains the theoretical background and summarizes the individual chapters and the objectives of the work. The overarching aim of this work is the extension of existing literature and the derivation of practical implications for business managers, policy makers, package designers, and consumers. In line with that, *Chapter 2* investigates moral decoupling in the context of public health. This chapter examines consumers' reactions to transgressions of health protective measures implemented by the government. Findings highlight the applicability of the moral decoupling model to a public

health context and emphasize that effects of moral transgressions of health protective measures are (to some degree) channeled through judgment of performance and morality, and are even enhanced in people who are scared for their health. Interestingly, *Chapter 2* indicates that moral decoupling as an individual difference variable, might reach its limits in the context of personal health, as it shows to have little effect on behavioral intention. *Chapter 3* implements the moral decoupling perspective into the context of consumer hoarding. Results indicate that moral decoupling might be a novel approach to understand why and when consumers engage in hoarding. Similar to results of *Chapter 2*, findings of *Chapter 3* propose that fear (e.g., of food shortages) is a strong influence on consumer decision-making, possibly overriding reason (in line with previous research, e.g., Carfi et al., 2020). *Chapter 4* introduces the topic of sustainable consumption by testing effects of visual sustainable package design on purchase intention. Moral satisfaction, which can be defined as a good feeling that arises during or after consumption of a product (Bratanova et al., 2015), channels effects of visual sustainable design on purchase intention, specifically in female consumers. Continuing the assessment of the model in the context of sustainability, *Chapter 5* examines moral decoupling in the context of plastic usage. This chapter empirically investigates explicit as well as implicit effects on behavioral intention, by analyzing data from an Implicit Association Test (IAT) and data from an online-survey. Findings highlight the importance of addressing implicit attitudes when aiming at reducing plastic usage, as implicit attitudes have a crucial influence on effects of transgression relevance on consumers' tendency to decouple morally. Further extending the scope of the moral decoupling model, *Chapter 6* assesses consumer plastic usage and extends *Chapter 5*, by examining self-conscious emotions (negative emotions such as guilt, positive emotions such as pride) as factors channeling effects of transgression relevance on behavioral intention paralleling judgment of performance and morality. Findings indicate that especially negative emotions play an important role in consumers' decision not to purchase plastic

packaged products. Further, results propose that consumers' judgment of performance and morality are enhanced in consumers who are more ethically minded (e.g., worried about the environment). Finally, *Chapter 7* explores the moral decoupling model in the context of war and (political) conflict, aiming at answering the questions when and why consumers continue to buy products from companies resuming "business as usual" in aggressor nations after the invasion of another country. This chapter extends existing literature by including a third parallel mediator in the model, specifically judgment of social responsibility. Findings indicate that moral decoupling as an individual difference variable influences effects of transgression relevance on judgment of performance and morality. *Chapter 8* concludes the dissertation with conclusions for each chapter and for the dissertation as a whole.

In sum, findings from all Chapters extend research on moral decoupling by showing that the model can be applied in various contexts and by adding novel variables into the model, such as self-conscious emotions or judgment of social responsibility. Future research should aim at further extending the moral decoupling model and to test effects in field studies to improve generalizability.

Zusammenfassung

Seit langem sind die Gründe für unmoralisches und umweltfeindliches Verbraucherverhalten für Gesellschaft und Forschung gleichermaßen von Interesse (Carrington et al., 2010). Eine mögliche Erklärung dafür, warum Verbraucher¹ diese Verhaltensweisen an den Tag legen, obwohl sie sich ihrer Unmoral bewusst sind, liegt im Konzept der moralischen Entkopplung. Moralische Entkopplung kann als psychologischer Argumentationsprozess definiert werden, bei dem Verbraucher Leistungsurteile von Moralurteilen trennen (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013). Zahlreiche Studien haben dieses Prinzip der moralischen Entkopplung untersucht (Fehr et al., 2019; Haberstroh et al., 2017), aber bislang gibt es nur spärliche Erkenntnisse in Bezug zu alltäglichen moralischen Übertretungen auf Verbraucherebene und in Bezug zu Aspekten der Nachhaltigkeit.

Um zu untersuchen, warum und wann Verbraucher zwischen Leistungs- und Moralurteilen dissoziieren, werden in der vorliegenden Dissertation sechs empirische Forschungsarbeiten vorgestellt, in denen vermutete Effekte in verschiedenen Kontexten (COVID-19 (*Kapitel 2* und *Kapitel 3*), russische Invasion der Ukraine (*Kapitel 3* und *Kapitel 7*), visuelles nachhaltiges Design (*Kapitel 4*) und Plastikverbrauch (*Kapitel 5* und *Kapitel 6*)) getestet werden. Darüber hinaus wird das Modell der moralischen Entkopplung in verschiedenen Konstellationen getestet, in denen zusätzliche Faktoren getestet werden, die die Entscheidungsfindung der Verbraucher beeinflussen.

Kapitel 1 leitet in die Thematik der Dissertation ein, erläutert den theoretischen Hintergrund, gibt eine Zusammenfassung der einzelnen Kapitel und der Ziele der Arbeit wieder. Das übergreifende Ziel dieser Arbeit ist die Erweiterung bestehender Literatur und die Ableitung praktischer Implikationen für Unternehmensleiter, politische Entscheidungsträger,

¹ Zur besseren Lesbarkeit wird in dieser Zusammenfassung das generische Maskulinum verwendet. Die verwendeten Personenbezeichnungen beziehen sich – sofern nicht anders kenntlich gemacht – auf alle Geschlechter.

Verpackungsdesigner und Verbraucher. In diesem Sinne erforscht *Kapitel 2* moralische Entkopplung im Kontext der öffentlichen Gesundheit. Es werden Verbraucherreaktionen auf Verstöße gegen von der Regierung eingeführte Gesundheitsschutzmaßnahmen untersucht. Die Ergebnisse unterstreichen die Anwendbarkeit des Modells im öffentlichen Gesundheitskontext und betonen zudem, dass die Auswirkungen moralischer Übertretungen von Gesundheitsschutzmaßnahmen (bis zu einem gewissen Grad) durch die Beurteilung von Leistung und Moral kanalisiert werden und bei Menschen, die Angst um ihre Gesundheit haben, sogar verstärkt werden. Interessanterweise zeigt *Kapitel 2*, dass moralische Entkopplung als individuelle Differenzvariable im Kontext der persönlichen Gesundheit an ihre Grenzen stoßen könnte, da sie nur geringe Auswirkung auf Verhaltensabsichten zeigt. In *Kapitel 3* wird das Prinzip der moralischen Entkopplung auf Horten von Konsumgütern angewandt. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass moralische Entkopplung ein neuer Ansatz sein könnte, um zu verstehen, warum und wann Verbraucher horten. Ähnlich wie Ergebnisse aus Kapitel 2 legen die Resultate von *Kapitel 3* nahe, dass Angst (z. B. vor Lebensmittelknappheit) einen starken Einfluss auf die Entscheidungsfindung der Verbraucher hat und möglicherweise die Vernunft überwiegt (in Übereinstimmung mit früheren Untersuchungen, z. B. Carfi et al., 2020). *Kapitel 4* leitet in das Thema des nachhaltigen Konsums ein, indem es Auswirkungen von visuell nachhaltigen Verpackungsdesigns auf die Kaufabsicht untersucht. Moralische Zufriedenheit, die als ein angenehmes während oder nach dem Konsum eines Produktes definiert werden kann (Bratanova et al., 2015), kanalisiert die Effekte von visuell nachhaltigen Designs auf die Kaufabsicht, insbesondere bei weiblichen Verbrauchern. Weiterhin im Kontext der Nachhaltigkeit untersucht *Kapitel 5* moralische Entkopplung im Zusammenhang mit Plastikgebrauch. In diesem Kapitel werden sowohl explizite als auch implizite Effekte auf Verhaltensabsichten empirisch untersucht, indem Daten aus einem Impliziten Assoziationstest (IAT) und Daten einer Onlinebefragung analysiert werden. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, wie wichtig

es ist, implizite Einstellungen zu berücksichtigen, wenn es darum geht, Plastikverbrauch zu reduzieren, da diese einen entscheidenden Einfluss auf die Effekte der Relevanz von Überschreitungen auf die moralische Entkopplungstendenz der Verbraucher haben. *Kapitel 6* untersucht erneut Plastikverbrauch und erweitert *Kapitel 5*, indem es selbstbewusste Emotionen (negative Emotionen wie Schuldgefühle, positive Emotionen wie Stolz) als Faktoren untersucht, die die Auswirkungen der Relevanz von Überschreitungen auf die Verhaltensabsicht parallel zur Beurteilung von Leistung und Moral kanalisieren. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass insbesondere negative Emotionen eine wichtige Rolle bei Verbraucherentscheidungen spielen. Ferner legen die Ergebnisse nahe, dass Leistungs- und Moralurteile von Verbrauchern, die eher ethisch eingestellt sind (z. B. um die Umwelt besorgt sind), gestärkt werden. In *Kapitel 7* wird das Modell im Kontext von Kriegen und (politischen) Konflikten untersucht, um die Frage zu beantworten, wann und warum Verbraucher weiterhin Produkte von Unternehmen kaufen, die in Aggressorstaaten nach der Invasion eines anderen Landes weiterhin „business as usual“ betreiben. Dieses Kapitel erweitert die bestehende Literatur, indem es einen dritten parallelen Mediator in das Modell aufnimmt, nämlich die Beurteilung der sozialen Verantwortung. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass moralische Entkopplung als individuelle Differenzvariable die Auswirkungen der Relevanz von Übertretungen auf die Beurteilung von Leistung und Moral beeinflusst. *Kapitel 8* schließt mit Schlussfolgerungen für jedes Kapitel und für die Dissertation im Gesamten.

Zusammenfassend lässt sich sagen, dass die Ergebnisse aller Kapitel die Forschung zur moralischen Entkopplung erweitern, indem sie zeigen, dass das Modell in verschiedenen Kontexten angewendet werden kann, und indem sie neue Variablen in das Modell aufnehmen, wie z. B. selbstbewusste Emotionen oder die Beurteilung der sozialen Verantwortung. Zukünftige Forschungsarbeiten sollten darauf abzielen, das Modell der moralischen

Entkopplung weiter auszubauen und die Auswirkungen in Feldstudien zu testen, um die Generalisierbarkeit zu verbessern.

Chapter 2

Understanding German consumers' intention to adopt COVID-19 infection prevention measures: A moral decoupling perspective

Rebekka A. Böhm

Ulrich R. Orth

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Understanding German consumers' intention to adopt COVID-19 infection prevention measures: A moral decoupling perspective

Getting consumers to adopt infection prevention measures is important for society to overcome the coronavirus pandemic. This research adopts a moral decoupling perspective to examine how consumers in Germany respond to perceived transgressions of COVID-19 infection prevention regulations. Focusing on two nonpharmaceutical measures (mask wearing, social distancing) as well as a pharmaceutical one (vaccination), two empirical studies indicate that transgression relevance influences intention to adopt the measure (in parallel) through judgment of performance and judgment of morality. Type of transgression moderates the effect of transgression relevance on morality, but not on performance. In addition, effects weaken as a person's fear of infection increases. Effects are robust, though, when controlling for moral decoupling and moral delegation (Study 1), and additionally for psychological reactance and political orientation (Study 2). Implications for research and practice evolve around new insights into how to get consumers to adopt infection prevention measures more effectively.

Keywords: *consumers, COVID-19, Germany, moral decoupling, public health*

Chapter 3

**The need to stash 10 packages of toilet paper:
A moral decoupling approach to excessive stockpiling behavior during
times of crisis**

Rebekka A. Böhm

Ulrich R. Orth

Working paper

**The need to stash 10 packages of toilet paper:
A moral decoupling approach to excessive stockpiling behavior during
times of crisis**

Panic buying has been frequently observed during crises, for example when Hurricane Katrina hit the U.S. Gulf coast region in 2005. This study investigates panic buying (or hoarding) in the context of moral decoupling. By implementing three studies, different hoarding scenarios are examined (Study 1 and Study 2: COVID-19; Study 3: energy and food supply shortages due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine). Results indicate that at least some effects of transgression relevance on consumer intention to hoard are channeled through moral decoupling, judgment of performance and judgment of morality. For consumers that are very (not) anxious positive effects of moral judgments on intention get weaker (stronger). Results extend previous findings on consumer moral decoupling tendencies and can aid marketers in adapting and modifying business practices in times when consumer hoarding might be likely.

Keywords: *COVID-9; Behavioural intention; Moral decoupling; Hoarding; Fear; Susceptibility to normative influence*

Chapter 4

Power versus morality: uncovering the underlying mechanisms of consumer response to perceived visual sustainability in package design

Kristina Nickel

Rebekka Böhm

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Power versus morality: uncovering the underlying mechanisms of consumer response to perceived visual sustainability in package design

Purpose – Visual sustainability has gained significant relevance for both firms and consumers. While the importance of perceived sustainability in package design is well researched, there is a research gap regarding divergent responses of consumers to perceived visual sustainability.

This research aims to close this gap by providing deeper insights into the underlying mechanisms of perceived visual sustainability in package design. As a boundary condition, this work also investigates gender differences in response to a design's visual sustainability.

Design/methodology/approach – To explore the mediating influences of cognitive (i.e., a product's gentleness and power) versus emotional (i.e., moral satisfaction) attributes as well as the role of consumer gender in the perceived visual sustainability – purchase intention relationship, we extend previous research through three experiments.

Findings – Study 1 provides initial evidence supporting the main effect of perceived visual sustainability on purchase intention. Findings of Study 2 show that moral satisfaction serves as a significant driver of purchase intention for females, while power-related attributes are more influential for males. Study 3 provides additional evidence for the main effect, the interaction effect with consumer gender, and underlying mechanisms.

Practical implications – These findings have important implications for marketers and designers aiming to design packages that appeal to different consumer groups based on their (gender-specific) values regarding visual sustainability.

Originality – This work extends the literature on green behavior by highlighting the importance of perceived visual sustainability as a factor that influences purchase intention, and the role of cognitive versus affective mechanisms in shaping consumer responses to design sustainability.

Keywords: *Product design, Gender studies, Sustainability, Consumer behavior, Packaging*

Chapter 5

Plastic consumption: Immoral or practical? Implementing implicit attitudes into a moral decoupling perspective

Rebekka Böhm

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Plastic consumption: Immoral or practical? Implementing implicit attitudes into a moral decoupling perspective

This paper examines plastic consumption from a moral decoupling perspective. It is hypothesized that moral decoupling mediates the effect of perceived individual relevance of the transgression (plastic consumption) on judgments of performance and morality which in turn have an influence on whether consumers intent to buy packaged products or not. To test the research model, two studies were conducted – one which focused on applying the moral decoupling model to this specific context, analyzing explicit attitudes in an online study and one which implemented the Implicit Association Test (IAT) to further extend research findings and to consider implicit attitudes as well. Results indicate that whether consumers buy plastic packaged products depends on their perception of plastic as practical or morally wrong. Further, implicit attitudes significantly influence whether or not consumers will morally decouple performance from moral aspects.

Keywords: *plastic consumption, moral decoupling, IAT*

Chapter 6

I know plastic is bad, but it is so practical: Investigating moral decoupling and emotions in the context of plastic usage

Rebekka Böhm

Working paper

I know plastic is bad, but it is so practical: Investigating moral decoupling and emotions in the context of plastic usage

This paper investigates plastic usage in a moral decoupling context. Extending research on moral decoupling, two studies investigate mediating effects of morality and performance judgements and emotions (positive and negative) on purchase intention of plastic packaged products. Findings indicate that judgement of performance mediates effects of transgression relevance on purchase intention. For consumers who are more prone to decouple effects of performance judgements and negative emotions on purchase intention are enhanced. Findings extend research on moral decoupling and plastic usage; and can be used by managers to implement effective measures to reduce plastic waste.

Keywords: *plastic usage, moral decoupling, emotions, cognitive effort, Ethically Minded Consumer Behaviour*

Chapter 7

When firms continue doing business in aggressor nations: A refined moral decoupling perspective on consumer response

Ina-Linda Deuchert

Rebekka Böhm

Caroline Meyer

Ulrich R. Orth

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When firms continue doing business in aggressor nations: A refined moral decoupling perspective on consumer response

Russia's invasion of Ukraine prompted many Western companies to pull out of the aggressor country. This study examines why and when consumers purchase from companies that choose to sustain operations in Russia. This study advances a refined moral decoupling model where effects of transgression relevance on purchase intention are channeled not only through judgments of performance and morality, but additionally through judgment of social responsibility. Results of an empirical study with four German companies and a sample of German consumers indicate that the relevance of a company's transgression influences consumer purchase intention through judgments of social responsibility and morality. This remains stable regardless of individual differences in moral decoupling. However, judgments of performance mediate a transgression's effects on purchase intention only with individuals who are less prone to decoupling. Effects of a company's perceived social responsibility on purchase intention are weaker with the politically more liberal than with the more conservative, whereas effects of morality are enhanced by a more liberal political orientation and the strength of a person's moral identity. These findings aid researchers and practitioners by advancing a refined moral decoupling framework that has greater relevance in the context of political conflict and war.

Keywords: *corporate social responsibility; moral decoupling*