



# Does Induced Gratitude Reduce Moral Licensing Behavior?

Gina Gwiazda (Faculty Advisor: Andrea Patalano)  
Department of Psychology, Wesleyan University



## Introduction

The idea that human behavior is motivated by cognitive consistency has been used as a unifying framework across social cognition. According to many psychological theories, when past moral behavior is recalled, people will be motivated to act morally in order to maintain consistency.<sup>1</sup>

However, recent evidence reveals a striking example of behavioral inconsistency<sup>2</sup>:

**Moral Licensing:** a phenomenon where past good deeds or moral choices enable or “license” individuals to act in immoral, selfish, or unethical ways in the future.

Moral licensing has been demonstrated across many domains, from consumer purchasing to prosocial behaviors. However, there has been little work investigating moderators of moral licensing or ways to reduce it.

Gratitude refers to one’s general state of thankfulness or appreciation for what is valuable or meaningful to oneself. Gratitude has been shown to facilitate prosocial behavior, increase ethical decision making, and minimize impulsive decision making.

**In the present study, I investigate whether induced gratitude reduces moral licensing behavior in a consumer decision making task.**

## Study Methods

**Participants:** Adults ( $N = 448$ , ages 18-80, Prolific internet sample) were randomly assigned to one of the following mood conditions and licensing conditions (in a 2x2 between-subjects design). The mood and licensing tasks were adapted from DeSteno et al. (2014) and Khan and Dhar (2006), respectively.

**Mood Conditions:** In the gratitude condition, participants wrote for 5 minutes about a time they were grateful. In the neutral condition, they wrote about a typical day in their lives.<sup>3</sup> All participants then rated their present mood state (e.g., grateful, appreciative, bored) on a scale from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*.

**Licensing Conditions:** In the virtuous condition, participants chose a preferred volunteer position (helping plant trees vs. helping children at a shelter). In the non-virtuous condition, they chose a preferred paint color for their bedroom (Upward Blue vs. White Linen).<sup>4</sup>

**Consumer Choice Task:** All participants made a binary choice between purchasing a handheld vacuum cleaner (utilitarian option) and a pair of designer sunglasses (luxury option) using a small tax rebate. The dependent measure was one’s choice, with selection of the luxury product taken as evidence of less virtuous behavior.<sup>4</sup>

All participants also completed a trait gratitude measure.

## Preregistered Measures and Predictions

### Moral Licensing Effect in Neutral Condition

- **If there is a replication of the moral licensing effect** → Participants in the virtuous licensing condition should choose the luxury item significantly more often than those in the non-virtuous licensing condition (see first two rows of Table 1, based on the findings of Dhar & Khan, 2006; Study 1).

## Preregistered Measures and Predictions (Cont.)

### Moral Licensing Effect in Gratitude Condition

Assuming a replication of the moral licensing effect in the neutral condition:

- **If gratitude does not reduce the moral licensing effect** → Participants in the gratitude condition should show the same licensing pattern as the neutral condition.
- **If gratitude does reduce the moral licensing effect.** → Participants in the gratitude condition should show a reduced or eliminated licensing effect. In particular, they should the same pattern of behavior in the non-virtuous and virtuous licensing conditions (second two rows of Table 1).

**Table 1.** Predicted Pattern of Findings if Gratitude Eliminates Moral Licensing

Consumer Choice			
Mood Condition	Licensing Condition	Luxury Item	Utilitarian Item
Neutral	Non-Virtuous	27.7%	72.3%
	Virtuous	57.4%	42.6%
Gratitude	Non-Virtuous	27.7%	72.3%
	Virtuous	27.7%	72.3%

### Exploratory Questions

Is moral licensing behavior related to trait gratitude, state gratitude, age, or gender identity?

## Results

### Successful Mood Manipulation Check

State gratitude was assessed as one’s mean response to the grateful, appreciative, and thankful descriptors. Participants in the gratitude condition had significantly higher state gratitude ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) than those in the neutral condition ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ),  $t(446) = 9.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.93$ ), evidence that the manipulation was successful.

### No Moral Licensing Effect in Neutral Condition

In the neutral mood condition, regardless of whether or not participants first engaged in a virtuous activity, they chose the utilitarian option approximately 72% of the time,  $\chi^2(1, n = 223) = 0.38$ ,  $p = .537$ , indicating no moral licensing effect.

### No Moral Licensing Effect in Gratitude Condition

In the gratitude condition, regardless of whether or not participants first engaged in a virtuous activity, they chose the utilitarian option approximately 67% of the time,  $\chi^2(1, n = 225) < 0.01$ ,  $p = .963$ . Given that there was also no licensing effect in the neutral condition, this finding cannot be attributed to any gratitude-related changes.

### No Reliable Individual Predictors of Consumer Choice

A logistic regression analysis revealed that neither mood condition, nor licensing condition, nor the interaction predicted choice behavior, ( $\chi^2(3, N = 448) = 1.52$ ,  $p = .678$ ).

## Results (Cont.)

**Table 2.** Consumer Choice by Mood Condition and Licensing Condition

Consumer Choice			
Mood Condition	Licensing Condition	Luxury Item	Utilitarian Item
Neutral	Non-Virtuous	34 (30.1%)	79 (69.9%)
	Virtuous	29 (26.4%)	81 (73.6%)
Gratitude	Non-Virtuous	37 (33.0%)	75 (67.0%)
	Virtuous	37 (32.7%)	76 (67.3%)

Note. Number (and percentage) of individuals making each choice.

### Exploratory Analyses

Using logistic regression analyses, no relationships were found between any variables (i.e., trait gratitude, state gratitude, age) and consumer choice, (Walds  $< 1.54$ ,  $ps > .215$ ). The only exception was a significant relationship between gender identity and choice, where women were more likely to pick designer sunglasses than men, ( $\chi^2(3, N = 443) = 4.70$ ,  $p = .030$ ).

## Discussion and Conclusions

- Despite successfully inducing gratitude in participants, I was unable to replicate the moral licensing effect and thus could not assess whether induced gratitude changes licensing behavior.
- Design differences between Khan and Dhar (2006) and my study, such as distribution platform (i.e., in-person versus online) and inclusion of a mood manipulation, may have contributed to this non-replication.
- Going forward, it will be important to determine how robust this effect is and to develop an understanding of when it emerges (i.e., aspects of research design and moderators that contribute to its emergence).
- Given the role of gratitude broadly, induced gratitude remains a promising mechanism for reducing the moral licensing effect.

## References & Acknowledgements

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