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Deserving to Indulge and Donate: Drivers of Virtuous Consumer Behavior

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4

Chapter 4 | General Discussion

Marketing is a pervasive societal activity that goes considerably beyond the selling of toothpaste, soap, and steel. Political contests remind us that candidates are marketed as well as soap; student recruitment by colleges reminds us that higher education is marketed; and fund raising reminds us that "causes" are marketed. (Kotler & Levy 1969, p. 10)

One of the starting points of this dissertation is a broader definition of marketing that incorporates its value for society at large (AMA, 2017). This dissertation investigates *virtuous consumer behavior*—actions, choices, or decisions that provide delayed benefits (long term) to the self or indirect benefits to society or others and are in line with standards, such as ideals, values, morals, and social expectations, while coming at a (short-term) cost to the self (Baumeister et al., 2007; Hoch & Loewenstein, 1991; Read et al., 1999). Based on a review of past literature, this dissertation proposes that virtuous behavior is dynamic and that there is large heterogeneity in consumers' virtuous behavior. The dilemmas central to virtuous consumer behavior are shaped by temporal effects (short-term versus delayed benefits) and interpersonal effects (own versus others' benefits). Consequently, one of the key propositions is that research in this area should account for momentary changes and person-to-person differences in order to estimate, predict, and ultimately promote virtuous behavior.

The dissertation specifically focuses on two forms of virtuous behavior—healthier eating (Chapter 2) and prosocial behavior (Chapter 3)—as the relevance of these behaviors is at an all-time high in light of related societal challenges. For example, today's world is dealing with concerning increases in overweight and obesity rates—up to half of the global adult population is estimated to be overweight or obese by 2030 (Finkelstein et al., 2012). Furthermore, both global and local income disparities are large and increasing—in the Netherlands, for example, 1 million

inhabitants lived at risk of poverty in 2019 (CBS, 2020).

The central question of this dissertation is “*What is the impact of past virtuous consumer behavior and psychological entitlement on current virtuous behavior, and how can virtuous consumer behavior be promoted?*” Chapter 2 focuses particularly on the impact of the relative healthiness of past food choices, category type, and shopping trip stage on the relative healthiness of subsequent food choices. Hence, this chapter focuses predominantly on the temporal aspect of virtuous consumer behavior dilemmas—short-term versus long-term benefits. Chapter 3 particularly investigates the interplay between psychological entitlement and selectivity and their impact on prosocial behavior. Hence, this chapter focuses on the interpersonal aspect of the virtuous behavior dilemma—spending time and money to predominantly benefit others or the self. This fourth chapter summarizes the main findings and theoretical contributions following from the seven studies described in this dissertation, as well as practical implications and future research directions.

4.1 Main Findings and Theoretical Contributions

This section summarizes the main findings and theoretical contributions of the empirical projects described in Chapters 2 and 3.

4.1.1 Dynamic effects of past food choices on current food choices

The first empirical project investigates the existence and nature of *healthy shopping dynamics*—interdependencies between the relative (i.e., within-category) healthiness of sequential product choices within a major shopping trip. Given that food choices often involve a dilemma between short-term indulgence goals and long-term health goals (Dhar & Simonson, 1999; Laran, 2010; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000), it is proposed that consumers may not only solve this dilemma within a single, isolated

food choice, but may also balance their conflicting goals across multiple food choices. It is assessed empirically whether an initial choice stimulates similar subsequent choices, *reinforcement*, or dissimilar choices, *balancing* (Huber et al., 2008). Importantly, Chapter 2 tests whether these dynamics, thus far mainly investigated for category-level healthiness, also arise through changes in within-category healthiness during a shopping trip.

Across data from a lab study, an online experiment, and actual purchase data from a brick-and-mortar supermarket, the key finding is that the relative healthiness of an initial choice is inversely related to the relative healthiness of the subsequent choice. This finding is in support of *balancing*. Hence, when shoppers initially select a healthy option, this choice is typically followed by an unhealthier subsequent choice and vice versa. Specifically, the healthiness of an initial choice is partly, but not fully offset by a subsequent choice. For example, a product choice that is 60 kcal/100g healthier (unhealthier) than the category average reduces (increases) subsequent product choice healthiness by 8–11 kcal/100g.

This result validates past findings on balancing effects (on the category level). For example, an initial healthy choice may have been interpreted by consumers as a sign of progress towards a focal health goal, which may have caused the subsequent pursuit of inconsistent indulgence goals (Dhar & Simonson, 1999; Fishbach & Dhar, 2005). In addition, the effects can be explained by theories on the licensing effect, which posit that an initial healthy choice may offer a license or justification to engage in a subsequent indulgent choice, whereas an initial indulgent choice may activate a desire to improve the self and prevent further wrongdoings through a subsequent healthy choice (Chen & Sengupta, 2014; De Witt Huberts et al., 2012; Khan & Dhar, 2006; Hofmann & Fisher, 2012; Ramanathan & Williams, 2007).

Although past work found evidence for such dynamic effects as well (De Witt

Huberts et al., 2012; Dhar & Simonson, 1999; Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Khan & Dhar, 2006), these studies were typically limited to hypothetical choices, sequences of two choices, and choices among two food options. Chapter 2 extends the theoretical knowledge on dynamic effects by considering both controlled, hypothetical choices and actual purchases and by investigating a longer range of choices from wider assortments. In addition, Chapter 2 illustrates the robustness of these dynamics by correcting for regression to the mean and by controlling for product prices, the nature of the category, and unobserved basket-level heterogeneity, among others. By deviating from past work's focus on between-category healthiness and mainly focusing on within-category healthiness, this research establishes healthy shopping dynamics independent of any specific product category characteristics, corresponds with shoppers' approach to healthier food choices (FMI, 2016), and matches the level at which shoppers decide about products in the store (Block & Morwitz, 1999; Ross & Murphy, 1999).

Furthermore, extending current knowledge on how product-level decisions differ across categories and choices (Dhar & Wertenboch, 2000; Gilbride et al., 2015; Hui et al., 2009), the findings from Chapter 2 indicate that healthy shopping dynamics differ depending on the nature of the category and the stage of the shopping trip—the balancing pattern is less pronounced when the subsequent choice is made within a vice category (e.g., cookies). These conclusions extend earlier findings that choices within vice categories are unhealthier and a nutritional scoring system intervention is less effective within vice categories (Nikolova & Inman, 2015) by demonstrating an additional impact of category type on healthy shopping dynamics. Moreover, in the physical store, the less pronounced dynamic effect when choosing among vice categories, as well as the overall dynamic effect, in turn become less pronounced as the shopping trip progresses. Together, these findings generalize balancing and licensing

effects to product-level healthiness, and they illustrate when and where such healthy shopping dynamics are most pronounced.

4.1.2 Effects of psychological entitlement and selectivity on prosocial behavior

Chapter 3 combines insights from work on entitlement (Campbell et al., 2004), selectivity (Homburg et al., 2008), and prosocial behavior (Brunell et al., 2014) and tests the proposition that selectivity boosts prosocial behavior among entitled consumers—consumers with a sense that they are more deserving than others (Campbell et al., 2004). As entitled consumers typically mostly navigate interpersonal dilemmas by predominantly benefiting the self, for example by showing reduced volunteering and helping behaviors (Brunell et al., 2014; Strong & Martin, 2014; Zitek et al., 2010) and donating less to charity (Strong & Martin, 2014), the dominant belief in past literature is that entitlement reduces prosocial behavior. However, entitled consumers may comply with prosocial requests when the requests appeal to their need to express their perception of being different (Campbell et al., 2004; Zitek & Vincent, 2015). Chapter 3 focuses particularly on selectivity appeals—appeals that make consumers believe that they, and only they, have been selected to receive certain benefits or special treatment.

The main finding is that selectivity indeed increases prosocial behavior among entitled consumers, but not among those low in entitlement. This main finding is generalized across four experiments, focusing on both state and trait entitlement, and donations of both time and money. In addition, various alternative explanations for the effect (e.g., self-esteem, narcissism) are ruled out. A single-paper meta-analysis offers a further powerful assessment of the robustness of this effect (Maner, 2014; McShane & Böckenholt, 2017) and reveals that the interaction effect is relatively small yet significant across all four experiments, $r = .11$, $z = 3.89$, $p = .001$.

Furthermore, recent insights on the multifaceted nature of psychological entitlement (Hart, Tortoriello, & Breeden, 2020; Hart, Tortoriello, & Richardson, 2020) are incorporated by illustrating that the interplay with selectivity applies to consumers high in vulnerable-based entitlement (who consider themselves deprived), but not to those high in grandiose-based entitlement (who consider themselves superior). This interplay between vulnerable-based entitlement and selectivity was found to be mediated by distinctiveness validation. That is, being offered a selective opportunity validates consumers' uniqueness, which in turn boosts prosocial behavior among vulnerable-based entitled consumers.

Although this research is not the first to assess the relationship between entitlement and prosocial behavior (Brunell et al., 2014; Strong & Martin, 2014), it is the first to our knowledge to illustrate how selectivity appeals can promote prosocial behavior among a consumer segment that is typically less prone to engage in it. This is a crucial theoretical contribution as it illustrates that the negative social impact of entitlement, previously labeled "pervasive" (Campbell et al., 2004, p. 29), is in fact malleable.

Furthermore, through illustrating how selectivity appeals motivate those high, but not those low in entitlement, the findings could also reconcile earlier mixed evidence regarding the effectiveness of selectivity appeals in general. Specifically, past work suggests that selectivity can strengthen customer–company relationships and create positive consumer responses (Chan & Sengupta, 2010; Homburg et al., 2008), whereas it may also generate negative inferences about the organization (Eggert et al., 2015; Main et al., 2007). Based on our findings, entitlement forms one of the determinants of its impact.

Finally, the research incorporates and confirms earlier notions that separate (non-mutually exclusive) forms of entitlement can be identified (Hart, Tortoriello, &

Breeden, 2020; Hart, Tortoriello, & Richardson, 2020). Psychological entitlement was originally conceptualized as a facet of narcissism, but is now considered a stand-alone construct (Campbell et al., 2004). The current findings confirm that multiple facets of entitlement exist as well, specifically a vulnerable-based form and a grandiose-based form, with unique behavioral manifestations. Hence, this work also extends theory on the nature of the entitlement construct.

4.1.3 Integration of main findings

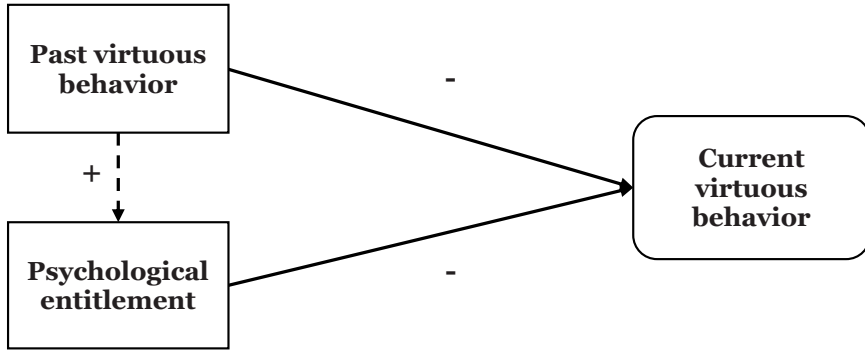
In order to answer the central research question of this dissertation and derive broader implications on the navigation of virtuous consumer behavior dilemmas, it is worth combining the evidence regarding the independently studied drivers of virtuous behavior into an overarching framework (see Figure 4.1). Although one could argue that the effects have been studied across relatively dissimilar forms of virtuous behavior—healthier eating and prosocial behavior—past work has illustrated that both dynamic effects and entitlement effects on virtuous behavior can spill over *across domains* (Blanken et al., 2015). For example, participants who initially imagined doing volunteer work subsequently preferred hedonic over utilitarian products (Khan & Dhar, 2006), and participants who bought “green” products (vs. regular products) subsequently made more selfish monetary decisions (Mazar & Zhong, 2010). Hence, an integration across chapters seems warranted, which yields various insights on how past virtuous consumer behavior and psychological entitlement together shape current virtuous behavior.

Based on Chapter 2 and broader meta-analytical evidence for a balancing effect in the moral domain (Blanken et al., 2015), it seems that a past virtuous act has a predominantly negative impact on current virtuous behavior. Hence, exercising self-control on an initial occasion by prioritizing the long term (vs. the short term) or others

(vs. the self) may lead to reduced virtuous behavior on a subsequent occasion. Furthermore, based on Chapter 3 and earlier work on the construct, psychological entitlement typically reduces virtuous behavior, such that those high in state or trait entitlement are less prone to engage in it (Campbell et al., 2004; Brunell et al., 2014). Thus, the overall findings could be summarized into a cautionary conclusion; one good deed may stimulate a bad subsequent deed, and a sense of deservingness may stimulate unvirtuous deeds as well (Figure 4.1). Importantly, recent evidence even suggests that the mechanism through which past virtuous behavior promotes subsequent unvirtuous behavior may be an entitlement-based mechanism (Loi et al., 2020), as indicated by the dashed line in Figure 4.1. This mechanism would suggest a “vicious cycle” where virtuous behavior, through a state of high entitlement, reduces subsequent virtuous behavior. Although Chapter 2 suggests that this more vicious behavior will in turn be balanced with more virtuous behavior as well, the supermarket data suggests that this occurs asymmetrically—unvirtuous behaviors are balanced to a lesser extent than virtuous behaviors. This may signify a dynamic, yet negative trend following initial virtuous behavior.

Importantly, Chapter 2 suggests that the magnitude of these dynamics is relatively limited—more and less virtuous behaviors are not fully offset during subsequent behaviors. Furthermore, there may be ways to disrupt negative trends. Indeed, both empirical chapters suggest that these effects are malleable. The balancing pattern across subsequent behaviors is less pronounced when the behavior falls within a less virtuous overall domain (e.g., a vice food category) and when engaging in a longer sequence of behaviors. Moreover, entitlement interacts with selectivity such that a selectivity appeal (“we specifically selected you”) promotes virtuous behavior among those with a high sense of entitlement. Utilizing these notions could help practitioners promote virtuous behaviors, as discussed in the next section.

Figure 4.1: Links between past virtuous behavior, psychological entitlement, and current virtuous behavior



4.2 Practical Implications

What could practitioners (e.g., policy makers, retailers, governments) do in order to better understand the dilemmas inherent to virtuous consumer behavior, and to effectively promote virtuous behavior? The findings in this dissertation offer various answers to this question.

Focusing on healthy eating, Chapter 2 suggests that it is essential to account for the interdependence between sequential virtuous behaviors. Many existing in-store interventions, such as a sugar tax on sugary soft drinks, assume that one healthier choice also leads to healthier baskets. However, this notion ignores possible balancing effects that could partly or fully offset its health gains (Cadario & Chandon, 2020; Roberts, 2015; Waterlander et al., 2012). Therefore, new types of interventions may be needed to promote *persistent* healthier choices.

Specifically, it may be helpful to refrain from unhealthy “vice” categories altogether, to shop online, and to limit the duration of shopping trips. These suggestions are corroborated by related scientific evidence (Huyghe et al., 2017; Nikolova & Inman, 2015). Other work also suggests that consumers can be motivated

to persist in healthy choices by evoking pride related to a previous healthy behavior (Storch et al., 2020). Building on Garvey and Bolton (2017), an additional strategy may be to stretch the importance of consistently healthy choices to consumers. Evoking pride or stretching the importance of consistency could be executed using *smart shopping carts* and real-time feedback (Van Ittersum et al., 2013; Sheehan & Van Ittersum, 2018), among others.

Although the benefits of promoting healthier choices from a societal welfare perspective may be clear, one could argue that consumers and commercial organizations may not always welcome them. Some consider such interventions paternalistic and some believe that reduced consumption may not be good for business (Cadario & Chandon, 2020). However, consumers seem to value initiatives that help them engage in healthier behavior, especially if they perceive them to be effective, and educating consumers about intervention effectiveness could therefore increase acceptance (Cadario & Chandon, 2019). Furthermore, promoting societal welfare through health interventions may create more favorable brand attitudes and improve corporate reputation, which may create a positive net effect on the bottom line (Torres et al., 2013; Webster & Lusch 2013).

The evidence from Chapter 3, focusing on prosocial behavior, suggests that virtuous behavior could successfully be promoted by applying selectivity practices. That is, framing an opportunity to donate or volunteer as an opportunity that is offered to only a selection of consumers may persuade entitled consumers—those naturally inclined to navigate trade-offs between the self and others by prioritizing benefits to the self—to comply as well. The results could also aid in addressing other societal challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Applying selectivity—for example via an opportunity to use unique soap or facemasks—might stimulate compliance with health guidelines among entitled consumers. In a broader consumption context, our finding

that entitled consumers respond particularly positive to selective offers could also inform the design of commercial offers and loyalty programs. As selective offers and programs set entitled consumers apart from other consumers, these offers may be especially welcomed by entitled consumers, whereas they may be ineffective, or even backfire, among consumers low in entitlement. Hence, our findings also underline earlier calls to account for the potential dark sides of selectivity (Eggert et al., 2015).

Apart from tailoring to entitled consumers using selectivity appeals, Section 4.1.3 suggests that interventions may also need to focus on preventing feelings of entitlement from arising, or temporarily lowering consumers' sense of entitlement. The reason for this is that entitlement may form a critical element driving the "vicious cycle" following initial virtuous behavior. Both this dissertation and past work offer various ways to reduce consumers' sense of entitlement. As a case in point, Experiment 3 in Chapter 3 lowered state entitlement by having participants recall reasons why they would *not* deserve more than others. Prior work situationally lowered entitlement by inducing awe—positively valenced feelings of wonder and amazement—via exposing participants to atypically tall trees (Piff et al., 2015). Exposing shoppers or prospective donors to panoramic nature views could therefore promote virtuous consumer behavior. Vice versa, entitlement-related messages in the media (Twenge, 2014) and marketing campaigns (e.g., L'Oréal's "Because you're worth it") may *increase* state entitlement and reduce virtuous behavior.

4.3 Future Research Directions

This dissertation focuses on an ambitious and broad central research question by studying how temporal and interpersonal dilemmas shape virtuous consumer behavior and which drivers influence how consumers handle these dilemmas. Chapters 2 and 3 provide steps towards answering this question. Yet, numerous avenues for future

research remain. This section proposes some specific directions.

One limitation of Chapter 2 is that it mainly relies on observational data. Although the nature of the data is unique in that it is basket-level, time-series data, the data is not experimental (apart from random assignment to a choice format in Study 2). Hence, the internal validity of the balancing effect (from healthier choices to unhealthier choices and vice versa) could be questioned, and the studies do not empirically assess *why* this balancing effect arises. However, various alternative explanations for these dynamics are ruled out, such as regression toward the mean, product prices, the nature of the category, and unobserved basket-level heterogeneity. Furthermore, several established marketing theories support a balancing pattern across sequential food choices (Huber et al., 2008). For instance, an initial choice may license or entitle consumers to a dissimilar subsequent choice (Khan & Dhar, 2006; Loi et al., 2020). Yet, to further validate these accounts, future research could empirically verify that the product-level dynamics demonstrated across the three studies in Chapter 2 are driven by these mechanisms. For example, future studies could experimentally evoke a high (vs. low) perceived relative healthiness of an initial choice to test whether and why it changes the relative healthiness of a subsequent choice. This test would also require measurement of various potential mediators (e.g., state entitlement and consumers' self-concept).

Another future research avenue based on Chapter 2 could be to further investigate whether some consumers are more prone to balance the relative healthiness of their food choices than others. While the balancing effect was found to depend on the nature of the food category and the stage of the shopping trip, we did not find evidence for any moderating effects of individual differences. Previous research has suggested that the strength of consumers' balancing tendency depends on the salience of the conflicting goals relevant to the behavior (Dhar & Simonson, 1999).

If so, consumers with stronger health goals, or alternatively, those with dominant enjoyment goals, may be less prone to compensate across choices. Instead, these consumers may consistently select relatively healthy or unhealthy products. Furthermore, building on the notion that balancing may be a consequence of self-control lapses, the balancing effect may also become less pronounced as consumers' self-control increases (Tangney et al., 2004). Future research could profitably investigate whether such individual differences indeed moderate the effects. Moderating effects of interrelationships between consecutive categories, as well as moderating effects of various types of interventions on healthy shopping dynamics, could also be worth investigating.

It could also be argued that the dynamic effects focal to Chapter 2 could occur such that consumers not only balance what they consume but also *how much* they consume (Cleeren et al., 2016; Wansink & Chandon, 2006). As Chapter 2 focuses on caloric density as dependent measure instead of absolute calories, the present findings cannot be explained by changes in the quantity of the selections. Yet, future studies could incorporate such a “boomerang effect” and test whether consumers also dynamically change how much they eat. Perhaps consumers determine both what and how much to eat in a more holistic, dynamic fashion. More generally, food purchases are not perfectly linked with food intake (e.g., due to shopping for others), which could suggest that dynamic effects of what consumers buy differ from, or interact with, dynamic effects of what they eat. However, these are difficult empirical issues to address, as they require detailed purchase data as well as intake data. Furthermore, as people usually base their food perceptions more on food type than on volume (Liu et al., 2019), it could be inferred that food volume dynamics will be more modest than food shopping and food choice dynamics.

A broad further research avenue based on Chapter 3 is to investigate when and

how psychological entitlement reduces prosocial behavior. Although the evidence from Experiments 1–4, as well as the meta-analysis across these experiments, robustly indicates that entitled consumers donate more time and money when the opportunity to do so is framed as selective, the specific ‘simple’ effects of entitlement across selectivity conditions vary across experiments. Whereas donations mostly reduce as entitlement increases in the absence of a selectivity appeal, this pattern is not fully consistent. Future studies could explore what drives these differences. For example, the relationship may depend on the costliness and perceived significance of the prosocial behavior. Literature acknowledges that exchange theory considerations such as high inherent costs may limit the impact of psychological factors on prosocial motivations (Groves et al., 1992) and at least one other investigation did not find a consistent negative main effect of entitlement either (Strong & Martin, 2014). Still, future research should further examine how entitlement reduces prosocial motivations among a wider variety of prosocial requests.

Building on the current findings, future studies could also investigate how entitled consumers respond to appeals other than selectivity appeals. The social influence literature offers many candidates, but few of these appeals may motivate entitled consumers. For example, would reciprocity appeals, such as unsolicited gifts—imagine Hare Krishna, who hands out flowers to passersby before requesting a donation—be wasted on those with a high sense of entitlement? Reports on their tendency to see favors and gifts as a one-way street (Twenge & Campbell, 2009) suggest so, although no direct empirical support for this notion seems to exist to date. Similarly, techniques that rely on consistency appeals—imagine the low-ball technique, which involves the introduction of an attractive request which is later replaced by a costlier request—may not motivate entitled consumers. Those high in entitlement have a loose attitude toward social norms (Campbell et al., 2004), which likely includes

consistency norms. An exploratory lab study that focused on the impact of an attractive request to participate in future research (vs. no initial request) on compliance with a costlier version of the participation request (“the research takes place at 7 a.m.”) supports this hypothesis; the low-ball technique increased the willingness to participate among those low in entitlement, but not among those high in entitlement (Van der Heide et al., 2016).

Finally, merging the topics of both empirical chapters, the combined impact of entitlement and past virtuous behavior on current virtuous behavior warrants further investigation. If not only health behavior, but also other forms of virtuous behavior, such as prosocial behavior, are shaped by dynamic effects (Dawson et al., 2019; Loi et al., 2020), and if psychological entitlement indeed relates to both prosocial behavior and health behavior (Kivetz & Zheng, 2006; Zitek & Schlund, 2021), virtuous behavior may be broadly shaped by consumers’ past actions and felt entitlement, and these drivers may interact in various ways. For example, recently published findings suggest that virtuous behavior reduces subsequent virtuous behavior through serial mediation via moral credits and a state of entitlement (Loi et al., 2020). Although no research to date has tested this notion, trait entitlement could then also *moderate* the strength of the balancing effect across behaviors—consumers who chronically feel deserving may be more prone to balance their past virtuous behaviors. This interplay may form a critical link in solving the puzzle of promoting pervasive virtuous behavior.

4.4 Concluding Remarks

The main conclusions of this dissertation are twofold: due to the inherent dilemmas involved, virtuous behavior is dynamic, and consumers are heterogeneous in their virtuous behavior. Within the health domain, it was found that the relative healthiness of an initial choice is inversely related to the relative healthiness of the subsequent

choice. Thus, shoppers balance between healthy and unhealthy options, which implies that the benefits of a single healthy choice may partly be offset during subsequent choices. As the specific dynamic effect depends on the nature of the food category and the stage of the shopping trip, and as the effect may be asymmetric across healthy and unhealthy previous choices, understanding and promoting healthier food choices requires a holistic, dynamic perspective.

Within the prosocial domain, it was found that entitled consumers donate significantly more time and money when the opportunity to do so is framed as a *selective* opportunity. This effect was attributed to the impact of a selectivity appeal on feelings of distinctiveness from others. Specifically, selectivity validates consumers' distinctiveness, and this distinctiveness validation in turn boosts prosocial behavior, especially among those high in the vulnerable-based form of entitlement. Hence, whereas entitled consumers may typically prioritize self-benefits and not engage in virtuous behavior, this may change when presented with the right type of marketing appeal.

Together, the findings have potential for what the *Journal of Marketing* would label "Better marketing for a better world". By deterring negative balancing effects and by tailoring marketing appeals to consumers' characteristics and motivations, consumers could be nudged towards virtuous cycles that enhance diets, donations, and societal welfare.

