When asked to donate, people often prefer to keep their money. When trying to lose weight, people are still drawn to chocolate cake, and have a hard time getting themselves to the gym. Consumers commonly struggle to act in line with their "code of virtue," which prescribes how they must think, feel, and act in order to maintain a virtuous self-image across various domains (e.g., being healthy, moral). How do consumers violate their codes while maintaining a virtuous self-image? I study psychological and behavioral strategies people use to shape their actions to be consistent with their codes. Although rationalization strategies can be useful, I suggest that consumers can also engage in behavioral strategies that directly shape their actions to be consistent with their code, rendering rationalization unnecessary. I explore these strategies across a variety of consumer contexts, including consumption of content related to moral values, prosocial behavior, indulgence, and social relationships. I organize these strategies below in temporal order through the decision process. I propose this order reflects how self-protective those strategies are, with earlier strategies being more protective and later strategies being less protective of one's moral self-view. Finally, I argue that rationalization strategies come as a last resort in the decision-making process, occurring only after it is clear that one cannot achieve virtue and self-interest at the same time. In providing this framework, I generate advances in research on self-control, social influence, morality, and self-evaluation, that offer prescriptions and interventions for marketing practitioners to increase "good" behaviors.

Non-Rationalization Strategies to Maintain the Code of Virtue

I. Pre-Violation Strategies

Avoiding code-inconsistent emotions. I propose that the code of virtue dictates that people should experience emotions that reflect virtuous characteristics (e.g., compassionate) even when those emotions are negative. Indeed, I find that not feeling compassionately enough for suffering others (e.g., in response to a documentary about the effects of Bullying) can be threatening to one's moral self-concept (Lin, Reich, and Kreps, in progress). As a consequence of this framework, I find that, in contrast to traditional hedonic motivations in emotion regulation, people do not always find it appropriate to repair their moods (Lin, Reich, and Kreps, under review). Although ice cream might be a welcome mood repair opportunity after watching a sad dramatic film like *The Notebook*, it may seem inappropriate after *Schindler's List*.

Furthermore, I find that people feel uncomfortable when hedonic content interrupts negative-yet-appropriate affect. In an online experiment, consumers felt uncomfortable when they read a negative tweet that they *should* feel sad about (e.g., a tweet about the death of earthquake victims) followed by a frivolous tweet (a tweet about eating Chipotle every day). However, they did not feel uncomfortable if the first tweet was negatively valenced, but did not evoke emotions prescribed by the code of virtue (e.g., a tweet about the death of olive trees). Thus, when marketers place consumers in such situations, it feels like a profane mix of affect, inconsistent with their codes of virtue, and consumers are likely to avoid such content.

However, the takeaway is not that people should always show as much emotion as possible when responding to these types of stimuli. Showing too much emotion can be deemed inappropriate as well. I find that showing more emotion than what they are deemed to be entitled—even in a direction typically deemed as morally appropriate—can lead others to view them as socially manipulative and less moral. For instance, a person showing an extreme emotional reaction at a mere acquaintance's funeral, or being extremely upset at the loss of a political candidate whom she did not spend much time or money supporting can lead to negative judgments (Lin and Kreps, in progress).

Avoiding code-inconsistent behavior. Clearly, in addition to avoiding inconsistent emotions, people can avoid engaging in behaviors that violate their code. With my Ph.D. advisee, I have examined when the consumer behavior of food sharing seems to be a code violation. Specifically, we have found that men feel that sharing food with other men violates their code of masculine heterosexuality (Xue and Lin, in progress). That is, men tend not to share food with other men because it feels too intimate, even when it leads them to make suboptimal meal choices, and to taste less variety than they otherwise would want. Our research thus shows how the desire to maintain masculine and heterosexual virtues translates into consumption contexts.

Avoiding virtuous options. When facing prosocial requests, many consumers feel trapped—in complying with or refusing the request, consumers must either lose their time or money, or they must violate their code of virtue. But by behaving strategically to avoid the appeal, consumers can avoid the tension altogether. For instance, when choosing between a difficult prosocial task and three fun tasks, I show that people avoid being trapped between the prosocial and fun tasks when possible (Lin, Schaumberg, and Reich 2016, *JESP*): In this study, some participants were presented all four options in a single choice set, and chose which task to engage in. Other participants viewed the same four options split into two choice sets, and picked the choice set they ultimately wanted to choose a task from; this let them avoid a direct choice between a prosocial and a fun task. Participants in this condition preferred to avoid the choice set containing the prosocial task—even at the cost of forgoing the fun task that was paired with it. Fewer participants chose both the prosocial task and the fun task paired with it than predicted by the control group (who viewed all four options in one choice set). Thus, the opportunity to avoid the prosocial request led both the prosocial organization and the consumer to be worse off; the prosocial organization received significantly fewer volunteers, and consumers had to give up the opportunity to participate in a fun task (even if that was the task they most wanted). Although people could choose the self-interested option (e.g., the fun task) and rationalize their decision (e.g., "I probably wouldn't have been helpful"), many prefer to avoid the decision altogether.

In another paper, I find that, in contrast to traditional self-enhancement motivation, consumers attempt to sidestep prosocial requests by reducing their perceived competence in related domains (Liu and Lin, equal contribution, 2018, *JCP*). For instance, when participants believed that academically competent people would be asked to engage in a prosocial behavior (providing uncompensated feedback on a pamphlet), they were less persistent on a task that reflected academic competence than if the prosocial behavior had a self-interested component (being paid to proofread the pamphlet). Thus, people are even willing to trade off their own perceived competence to avoid facing a prosocial request. These avoidance strategies allow consumers to sidestep the entire dilemma, which protects them from self-regard risks of having to rationalize their self-interested behavior upon being asked to engage in prosocial behavior.

One way to help consumers sidestep these unpleasant conflicts without having to give up other desired outcomes or lower their perceived competence is to allow them to leave the outcome up to fate. I have found that, when given the option, a substantial subset of people choose to remove their agency from the choice altogether and to be randomly assigned to a prosocial or self-interested outcome (Lin and Reich 2018, *JCP* Special Issue: Marketplace Morality). Participants choose to rely on chance because they feel torn between these outcomes, and feel less moral self-reproach afterwards than when choosing a self-interested outcome—thus including a random option can increase consumer welfare. Furthermore, including a random option can help increase prosocial behavior in the context of charitable donations.

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Maintain virtue in past behavior. In a very different context, I examine how people avoid decisions that would retroactively make prior behavior into violations of their codes of virtue. Because people consider being wasteful a violation, I find that people are averse to making prior behaviors retroactively feel wasteful (Lin, Chang, and Yang, in progress). Specifically, after expending effort engaging in a consumption behavior (e.g., making a special trip to the store), people will avoid engaging in a second consumption behavior that would render their original effort a waste (e.g., going to a restaurant located right next to the store later that day). Thus, people avoid activities that may bring them utility (i.e., eating at a preferred restaurant) simply to avoid feeling like they wasted their time earlier.

II. Mid-violation strategies

Change the context to make the behavior seem less bad. I also explore how people can manipulate their social norms to make their actions seem code-consistent. That is, social norms play an important role in dictating what is allowed by one's code (e.g., "I'll have a drink if everyone else is doing it!"). I find that people actively create local descriptive social norms to justify their own indulgence. For instance, consumers encourage others to match their behavior when they have chosen to indulge (relative to if they have abstained from indulgence; Lin and Wheeler, working paper). This shifts the local descriptive norm so that indulging is relatively normative, and no longer violates their code. Thus, although social influence is typically viewed as exogenous to actors, I show that actors also play a role in influencing their social influence. They change the situation to match their code rather than resorting to rationalization.

III. Post-violation strategies

Justifying based on the outcome of bad behavior. The above strategies change the quality of the violation such that the behavior no longer reflects low self-control or bad intentions. However, if people cannot actively make their behavior seem more code-consistent, they can justify their behavior based on the observed outcomes of their actions, rather than the intentions or circumstances surrounding their decision to take action. For instance, I find that those who have decided not to donate to charity will check whether the shelter happened to be closed, because they would feel less guilty if the shelter were closed (Lin, Zlatev, and Miller, working paper). However, I argue that because people intuit that the intention behind an action reflects one's virtuousness more than the consequences of it, the use of such justifications is biased. As evidence of this, I find that whereas people allow such justifications to excuse their own behavior, they do not excuse others' decisions under the same justifications; also, they recognize that incidental justifications *shouldn't* make them feel better about their code violation, even though they do. Thus, although people know it is illegitimate, they can actively seek factual evidence that their behavior was not in fact impactful to reduce their guilt.

Rationalization Avoidance

When the above strategies are not available, people can shift to rationalization of their sinful decisions. However, I argue that rationalization is nobody's first choice. I use dynamic contexts—contexts in which available options shift over time—to examine the lengths to which people go to avoid rationalization. In one project, I posit that people use rationalization only as a back-up for when their first choice—self-interest without self-reproach—is not available (Lin and Miller, R&R, *OBHDP*). As in my prior work (Lin and Reich 2018), I find that many people choose to flip a coin to assign themselves and another participant to tasks of varying pleasantness. In this work, however, after flipping the coin, participants have the opportunity to ignore the coin flip and assign themselves to an outcome. What do they do when that coin does

not come up in their favor? As previous researchers (i.e., Batson et al. 1998), I find that people tend to ignore the coin flip and assign themselves the positive outcome. Unlike prior work, however, I find that people do not set out intending to ignore the coin's outcome; instead, they blindly hope to achieve the positive outcome without self-reproach. Only when that option is not available do people renege on their decision to flip the coin by using rationalization strategies to literally switch decision strategies (i.e., explicitly switching from "use randomizer" to "skip randomizer and assign myself"). Thus, rationalization comes as a last resort.

Might it feel worse, though, to choose a moral path only to abandon it later than it does to simply stick to that path? In some cases, I posit that once consumers have chosen a self-protecting strategy, their moral self-view is enhanced, and they are therefore not likely to seek further strategies. For instance, of participants who were considering volunteering, participants who were given a legitimate justification to not volunteer (e.g., having an appointment at that time) had higher moral self-regard than those who did not have such a justification (Lin, Zlatev, and Miller 2017, *JESP*). That is, they attributed their behavior to outside circumstances, rather than their own desire not to volunteer (e.g., "I would volunteer if I could"). However, to maintain this high moral self-regard, they must commit to their justification even if it is removed (e.g., the appointment is canceled). Thus, ironically, those who have an excuse that is removed are more likely to engage in prosocial behavior than those who did not have an excuse in the first place. In addition, I find that people who are paid to engage in prosocial behavior over-attribute their behavior to their own motivation (e.g., "I care about at-risk youth"). Contrary to traditional overjustification effects, they are consequently *more* likely to engage in prosocial behavior after that payment is removed than people who were never offered payment. They created a new standard (i.e., "I care about at-risk youth") that they must avoid violating. These findings reveal the psychological constraints on the consumer's ability to justify self-interested behavior, while offering interventions that leverage the consumer's biased attributions to increase prosocial behavior.

Rationalization Strategies

Sometimes, there is no opportunity to engage in the above strategies. In these cases, they must resort to rationalization. I have studied three rationalization strategies in the context of interpersonal sabotage under threat (Lin, Wheeler, and Huang, working paper). That is, when people have been outperformed by their friends, they have conflicting motivations to self-enhance by sabotaging their friend, and to maintain a moral self-image. I find that, after being outperformed, people can sabotage others when the behavior itself can be seen as benevolent (e.g., "I'm getting her cake because she likes it" rather than "I want to sabotage her diet"). People also sabotage others when they can believe that their behavior is not likely to actually be harmful (e.g., "It probably won't actually affect him"). Lastly, people sabotage others when they believe that it is justified given the situational constraints (e.g., "she didn't deserve to do well, so she deserves to be taken down a notch"). Thus, the ability to rationalize is still constrained; one can only resort to this tactic when the situation allows opportunity to rationalize. In related projects, I examine self-interested motivations to sabotage and outperform others (Huang, Lin, and Zhang 2019, *JPSP*) and other-focused motivations to motivate others and to protect their feelings (Lin and Liu, equal contribution, working paper) during joint goal pursuit, which is becoming an increasingly prevalent phenomenon (e.g., fitness apps).

Self-Presentation Strategies

Finally, when people cannot justify their behaviors to themselves, they can try to justify their behavior to others. I examine motivations towards traditionally virtuous behaviors, such as

diet and exercise, in the self-control context, and suggest that consumers sometimes believe that their motivations are not in themselves virtuous. Specifically, I suggest that consumers are actually motivated by the prospect of improving their physical appearance, but that this motivation runs counter to their moral value system (e.g., reflecting vanity, low self-respect, and endorsement of harmful societal standards of beauty; Lin, Woolley, and Liu, working paper), and thus feels unjustifiable. Thus, although consumers pursue these appearance-relevant motivations in private (e.g., choosing articles about improving their physical appearance), they share more acceptable motivations (e.g., articles about mental clarity, heart health) with others, for instance, on their social media feeds.

Conclusion

My goal as a consumer behavior researcher is to understand the many ways through which consumers seek virtue in everyday life. I examine various consumption behaviors, such as consuming moral emotions, engaging in prosocial behavior, being healthy, and being a virtuous friend during joint goal pursuit processes. In doing so, I draw on and expand theory from the self-control, emotion regulation, social influence, self-enhancement, self-evaluation and morality literatures. I reveal shared self-maintenance mechanisms across these domains, and work towards a unifying theory of virtue maintenance in consumer behavior.