

An Experimental Exploration of the Interaction between Consumer Ethics Perceptions, Legality Evaluations, and Mind-Sets

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Abstract : During the last three decades, consumer ethics perceptions have attracted the attention of a large number of researchers. Nevertheless, little is known about the effect of the cognitive and situational contexts of the decision on ethics judgments. In this paper, the interrelationship between consumers' ethics perceptions, legality evaluations and mind-sets are explored. Legality evaluations represent the cognitive context of the ethical judgments, whereas mind-sets represent their situational context. Drawing on moral development theories and priming theories, it is hypothesized that both factors are significantly related to consumer ethics perceptions. To test this hypothesis, 289 participants were allocated to three mind-set experimental conditions and a control group. Participants in the mind-set conditions were primed for aggressiveness, politeness or awareness to the negative legal consequences of breaking the law. Mind-sets were induced using a sentence-unscrambling task, in which target words were included. Ethics and legality judgments were assessed using consumer ethics and internet ethics questionnaires. All participants were asked to rate the ethicality and legality of consumer actions described in the questionnaires. The results showed that consumer ethics and legality perceptions were significantly correlated. Moreover, including legality evaluations as a variable in ethics judgment models increased the predictive power of the models. In addition, inducing aggressiveness in participants reduced their sensitivity to ethical issues; priming awareness to negative legal consequences increased their sensitivity to ethics when uncertainty about the legality of the judged scenario was high. Furthermore, the correlation between ethics and legality judgments was significant overall mind-set conditions. However, the results revealed conflicts between ethics and legality perceptions: consumers considered 10%-14% of the presented behaviors unethical and legal, or ethical and illegal. In 10-23% of the questions, participants indicated that they did not know whether the described action was legal or not. In addition, an asymmetry between the effects of aggressiveness and politeness priming was found. The results show that the legality judgments and mind-sets interact with consumer ethics perceptions. Thus, they portray consumer ethical judgments as dynamical processes which are inseparable from other cognitive processes and situational variables. They highlight that legal and ethical education, as well as adequate situational cues at the service place, could have a positive effect on consumer ethics perceptions. Theoretical contribution is discussed.

Keywords : consumer ethics, legality judgments, mind-set, priming, aggressiveness

Conference Title : ICOBSP 2017 : International Conference on Organization Behavior and Social Psychology

Conference Location : Paris, France

Conference Dates : July 20-21, 2017