

Would you buy a product endorsed by Lance Armstrong?

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It's much easier for consumers to justify continued support of a celebrity or politician disgraced by scandal when they separate moral judgments about a public figure from assessments of their professional performance, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"Distinguishing between morality and performance allows consumers to avoid condoning [immoral behavior](#). This may be one reason that the [public discourse](#) around scandals often focuses on the relationship between performance and morality rather than how wrong an action is," write authors Amit Bhattacharjee (Dartmouth College), Jonathan Z. Berman, and Americus Reed II (both Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania).

What do Bill Clinton, Martha Stewart, Tiger Woods, and Roman Polanski have in common? They are all public figures whose reputations have been threatened by scandals attracting relentless media coverage. How do consumers justify buying products endorsed by a celebrity accused of immoral actions or voting for a politician implicated in a scandal?

While some consumers withdraw their support, others may find ways to justify continuing their support either by excusing or justifying the immoral actions in question or separating a judgment of morality about the public figure from an assessment of their performance.

For example, after Tiger Woods admitted to adultery, consumers argued that they don't care for [Tiger Woods](#) as a person but still think he is the best golfer in the world and thus will continue to purchase his golf clubs. Instead of arguing that an immoral action is not that severe, consumers prefer to argue that it's not that relevant.

"It may feel wrong to say that immoral actions are acceptable. We don't want to be judged negatively by others for justifying [bad behavior](#). Separating morality from professional standing may be especially appealing, and especially prevalent in public scandals, because it allows us to support an immoral actor without condoning their actions. It's a win-win," the authors conclude.

More information: Amit Bhattacharjee, Jonathan Z. Berman, and Americus Reed II. "Tip of the Hat, Wag of the Finger: How Moral Decoupling Enables Consumers to Admire and Admonish." *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2013.

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