

# Double standard? The use of performance-enhancing products

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When professional athletes are found to be using performance-enhancing drugs, many people consider this an unfair advantage and say they are cheating. But when another person uses the same drug to overcome a disease or behavioral issue, society is more forgiving. A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* shows that people are more forgiving when the benefit is personal.

"Our research shows that when people see others using ability-boosting products, they are more likely to see this behavior as morally unacceptable than if they were using the products themselves," write authors Elanor F. Williams (University of California, San Diego) and Mary Steffel (University of Cincinnati).

Studying what they call an ethical double standard, the authors conducted five experiments to understand how people perceive the use and regulation of products and services designed to enhance one's ability, performance, appearance, potential, or well-being.

In one study, participants were asked to imagine either taking or not taking a medication to improve their focus and concentration while taking an exam. Also taking the exam were people either diagnosed or not diagnosed with ADHD.

When outperformed on the test by those taking the medication, participants were more likely to view taking the medication without having ADHD as embellishing one's performance abilities. Interestingly,

when told to imagine that they had taken the medication, participants saw the use of the medicine by those diagnosed with ADHD as no more embellishing, yet more enabling, than their own personal use.

For companies selling performance-enhancing products and services, study results can offer insight into the importance and implications of making their brand seem more acceptable to others.

"To make ability-boosting products more palatable, we suggest brands describe the products' effects as enabling true abilities rather than embellishing beyond them. On a personal note, we encourage consumers to consider themselves, not others, when purchasing these items," the authors conclude.

**More information:** Elanor F. Williams and Mary Steffel. "Double Standards in the Use of Enhancing Products by Self and Others." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2014.

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