

Welfare recipients seen as immoral for buying ethical products, study finds

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Welfare recipients are judged more harshly if they make ethical purchases, according to a Sauder study. Credit: Charles Wiriawan / Flickr

Shoppers making ethical purchases, such as buying organic food or environmentally friendly cars, are generally seen as more virtuous - unless they're receiving government assistance. If ethical shopping is funded by welfare cheques, those shoppers are judged as immoral for taking advantage of public generosity, according to a new UBC Sauder School of Business study.

"People on [welfare](#) tend to be seen as undeserving of more expensive options and of wasting taxpayers' hard-earned cash," said study author Darren Dahl, senior associate dean of faculty at UBC Sauder. "We discovered a double standard where people are judged differently for making identical choices, depending on where their money comes from."

Dahl and his co-authors were curious about the interaction between two prized values: making prosocial choices and thrift. They found that people reliant on government assistance are only praised when they're frugal, and are seen as less moral if they go for ethical but more expensive products.

In a series of five studies, more than 1,300 participants in the United States were asked to judge people on measures of morality based on their grocery lists (either including organic foods or not) or their chosen rental car (either environmentally friendly or not). When choosing a more expensive ethical product, those on welfare were seen as less moral while more wealthy shoppers were seen as more moral.

The fifth study found that [people](#) were also less likely to donate to a charity if the meals it provides are organic.

The paper, "Wealth and Welfare: Divergent Moral Reactions to Ethical Consumer Choices," co-authored by Jenny Olson, UBC Sauder alumnus Brent McFerran, Andrea Morales and Darren Dahl, the BC Innovation Council Professor at UBC Sauder and director of the Robert H. Lee Graduate School, is forthcoming in the April 2016 issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

More information: Jenny G. Olson et al. Wealth and Welfare: Divergent Moral Reactions to Ethical Consumer Choices, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2016). [DOI: 10.1093/jcr/ucv096](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucv096)

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