

Moral character of victims can influence consumer action against companies

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When David Dao was forcibly removed from a United Airlines flight in 2017 after declining to give up his seat for United employees, there was immediate public outrage against the airline. But quickly after the event, news spread that Dao had used his medical license to trade prescription drugs for sex. Online reports implied that Dao, rather than United Airlines, was to blame because he was viewed as a bad person.

This tendency to shift blame to victims based on assumptions about their character can have serious consequences in today's [free market](#), where consumers have more power than ever to hold companies accountable for faulty products or services. In a new study, researchers discovered which factors lead people to assign blame to a victim and the repercussions of this judgement. The study, which was led by marketing assistant professor Brandon Reich of Portland State University, was recently published online in the Journal of Consumer Psychology.

In one experiment, researchers summarized the United Airlines incident for participants. One group heard that Dao had traded [prescription drugs](#) for sex while the second group did not learn about this detail. Then the participants were told that a lawsuit against the airline required a certain number of signatures to proceed, and they were invited to sign the petition. The results of the study showed that when participants were informed about Dao's past moral transgressions, they were significantly less likely to sign the petition against United Airlines, with 65 percent versus 84 percent signing depending on knowledge of the transgression.

"The evidence suggests that introducing the morality of the victim, which is irrelevant to the harm they suffered from a faulty product or service, leads to changes in our thinking about who is to blame and who should be held responsible," says Troy Campbell, Ph.D., an assistant professor of marketing at the University of Oregon who was involved in the study. "Individuals, groups and society can be harmed by irrational victim blaming, so we need to more fully understand this psychological tendency."

In a second experiment, participants read about a scenario in which a bank employee noticed that he had an extra \$200 in his register due to another employee's error. In one group, participants learned that the bank employee kept the money for himself, while the second group learned that the employee told his manager about the discrepancy. The next day, the bank employee's hot coffee spilled all over his lap due to faulty threading in his travel mug. Then the participants answered questions about the scenario, and they were more likely to blame the employee for the spilled coffee when he had kept the \$200 for himself. They were also less likely to write a negative review about the travel mug brand or verbally discourage others from using the brand.

Campbell hopes these findings will increase awareness among consumers as they decide when to take action to protect the public. Consumers may have fodder to blame victims of food poisoning, malfunctioning cars, faulty technology products or many other product or service failures. Moral judgements about the victims of sexual or racial harassment can also impact public responses to incidents.

"The more we blame a victim, the less likely we are to take action," says Campbell. "If people are aware of how irrelevant information can influence their behavior, my hope is that they will be empowered to make rational decisions that enable the free market to work more effectively."

More information: Brandon J. Reich et al. Who Deserves Faulty Products? How Blaming the Victim Prevents Consumer Punitive Action, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.1124](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1124)

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