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# When Feeling Good Feels Morally Wrong



By Stephanie Lin , INSEAD; Taly Reich , Yale School of Management; and Tamar Kreps , University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

**After witnessing human suffering, people believe it is more appropriate to prolong negative emotions than repair their mood.**

After watching a heart-breaking movie, we might be tempted to lift our spirits by flicking to a comedy show or engaging in a frivolous, pleasurable activity. But there are instances when moving from something distressing to something trivial just doesn't feel appropriate.

While previous research suggests that people might enjoy seeing a comedic ad after a tragic news story if they believe it will effectively boost their mood, we found that this is not the case when it comes to stories around human suffering.

Our research, published in the *Journal of Marketing Research*, found that people believe it is relatively immoral to engage in mood repairing consumption after viewing content related to human suffering, even if it makes them feel better. Instead, they find it morally appropriate to prolong their negative feelings in response to content concerning the welfare of

others.

It is important to understand why people may be motivated to experience these emotions in the face of human suffering. **Research indicates** that showing negative emotions signals good moral character and concern for others, allows for an appropriate amount of reflection and **may lead to prosocial action** like helping victims or punishing perpetrators. Thus, we suggest that people are motivated to sustain their negative emotions when they are exposed to human suffering.

## **The moral choice**

We set out to explore whether participants would have a stronger moral response to content related to human suffering relative to other moral values. Participants were asked to imagine watching documentaries related to five different moral foundations – harm/care, ingroup/loyalty, fairness reciprocity, authority/respect, purity/sanctity – as well as negative control films without moralised content. For instance, documentary descriptions indicated a film about a boy who was abused by his foster parents (harm/care) and a violent slasher horror film (negative non-moralised).

Participants answered questions about how watching the film would make them feel, the moral appropriateness of continuing to feel those emotions and the film's moral relevance. Results indicated that people find it more morally appropriate to sustain emotions after engaging with negative moralised content – especially content related to harm/care (human suffering) – compared to other negative content.

In our next study we asked participants to imagine watching a war documentary or a fictional war film to determine the effect of experiencing real or fictional human suffering on consumption. Participants considered how morally appropriate it would be to engage in mood repair activities (watching a slapstick comedy or listening to upbeat music), neutral activities (watching a maths tutorial or going grocery shopping) and mood-maintaining activities (listening to slow, melancholic music or sitting in silence).

As predicted, participants believed it was more appropriate to sustain their negative emotions following the war documentary depicting real human suffering than the fictional war film, and that it was morally inappropriate to distract themselves with mood-repairing content.

## Mood repair and moral duty

Next, we pitted people's motivation to do their perceived moral duty against the competing motivation to avoid negative feelings in real choice behaviour. In this study, participants read a passage about a real genocide (the Rwandan Genocide) or a fictionalised version of the same passage and selected a subsequent activity – either sitting in silence for 30 seconds or watching a clip from America's Funniest Home Videos. Just 16 percent of participants chose to watch the funny video after reading about real human suffering compared to 31 percent of participants who read the fictional passage. Furthermore, participants who read the real version believed it would be more morally inappropriate to view America's Funniest Home Videos than those who read the fictional piece.

But is there a way to offer mood-repairing content that consumers would feel comfortable with after viewing human suffering content? We thought this might have to do with how trivial the mood-repairing content seemed. In our next study, after watching a clip from a documentary about bullying or watching a sad fictional clip from *ET*, we gave participants a choice between sitting in silence for 30 seconds or viewing a Cheetos ad. In another condition, participants again viewed either the bullying clip or the clip from *ET*, but this time we gave them the choice between sitting in silence for 30 seconds or watching an ad about a social movement to encourage kindness. Participants considered the positive ad about kindness to be more moral than the positive ad about Cheetos. So, in this instance we found that participants did not find mood-repairing consumption to be inappropriate following content about human suffering if the content is morally relevant (about kindness).

Finally, we wanted to see if a person's perception of how moral they are had any effect on consumption choice following human suffering. In line with previous results, our final study found that participants thought watching a mood repairing ad for Bud Light after witnessing human suffering would be morally inappropriate than after witnessing a fictional sad film and chose to sit in silence instead. Importantly, we found these effects were strongest among individuals who perceived themselves as highly moral.

But are people avoiding mood repairing consumption to avoid looking bad to others or just to themselves? Our results suggest that the motivation is at least partially due to wanting to be self-consistent, rather than a

performative act of self-presentation.

## **Feeling good or feeling right**

Taken together, our findings provide strong evidence that people believe it is their moral duty to avoid mood repairing consumption following content about human suffering. While previous research indicates that emotional responses automatically give rise to moral judgments, our results raise the possibility that there may also be a reverse causal effect: The emotions people experience in response to moralised situations may sometimes be motivated, not just automatic. Furthermore, people may be motivated to maintain their empathy for others' suffering instead of avoiding or downregulating it.

Future research should investigate whether other moral domains elicit the same behavioural consequences and if positive mood-repairing content in the same domain (such as the kindness ad after the bullying video) is considered more acceptable than unrelated, frivolous content. It also remains to be seen how long people strive to feel negative emotions after exposure to human suffering.

Regardless of how long people might want to sit with their feelings, our findings have important implications for marketers and the media. By taking human suffering into consideration, marketers should strive to provide experiences that allow pensive mood maintenance and sustained focus, as this may seem more appropriate than pleasurable mood-repairing experiences. More generally, consumers may feel uncomfortable seeing ads or being recommended content based on their past search behaviour or interests, and this could even discourage them from buying the advertised products.

During devastating world events, media should consider taking more control over advertising and auto-suggested content so as not to disrupt consumers' experiences. Interrupting morally relevant and negative content with advertising about frivolous products could be jarring and could even spill over to negative perceptions about the brand or media organisation.

Media practitioners need to be aware that after consuming distressing news, consumers prefer neutral or mood-consistent products. People need to be given the space to feel bad for a little while in order to pay respect to suffering victims and help create a more compassionate society.

## Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/marketing/when-feeling-good-feels-morally-wrong>

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## About the author(s)

**Stephanie Lin** is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at INSEAD.

**Taly Reich** is an Associate Professor of Marketing at Yale School of Management.

**Tamar Kreps** is an Assistant Professor of Management and Industrial Relations at the Shidler College of Business, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

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## About the research

["Feeling Good or Feeling Right: Sustaining Negative Emotion After Exposure to Human Suffering"](#) is published in the *Journal of Marketing Research*.