

Lonely and non-empathetic people more likely to make unethical shopping decisions

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Lonely consumers are capable of behaving morally, but aren't motivated to, according to new research from Binghamton University, State University of New York.

"Consumers very often behave immorally. And while these behaviors are often legal, they are unethical and cost retailers billions each year," said Jenny Jiao, assistant professor of management at Binghamton University.

A common example of this kind of behavior is wardrobing.

"Wardrobing is when people buy an item, use it and then return it," said Jiao. "Someone may buy a big-screen TV for Super Bowl Sunday, only to return it on Monday; or they may buy a nice outfit for a night out, only to return it the next day."

There are many reasons why a consumer may decide to take part in this kind of behavior, but with a significant portion of the population reporting that

they feel lonely, Jiao and fellow researcher Jing Wang of the University of Iowa focused on whether loneliness could be a factor.

"There are a lot of dark sides to loneliness. Past research has established that feeling lonely can make you have a lower evaluation of yourself or cause you to have lower self-esteem. It also can negatively influence your health, and impair your self-regulation and social skills," said Jiao. "We wanted to see how it affects the ability to make [moral decisions](#)."

They specifically looked at the joint effect loneliness and [empathy](#) had on a consumer's overall [moral identity](#) (the importance of being a moral person to one's identity) and moral decision making by conducting four separate studies.

"Prior research has established the link between empathy and moral decision making. Typically, someone with a high level of empathy is less likely to engage in immoral behavior. We wanted to see what would happen when you factor in loneliness," said Jiao.

One of the studies gave participants an hour to complete math questions, with the incentive of being able to leave the session early depending on how many questions they claimed to have completed. Some participants were placed in a setting where they had an opportunity to cheat and leave early by reporting that they had completed more math questions than was possible, as some questions were intentionally unsolvable.

They found that participants who felt lonely and had low levels of empathy cheated more often to get out of the session early, while lonely people with high empathy cheated far less.

The results of the four studies helped answer another research question Jiao had—do lonely people have the ability to empathize and make

moral decisions, or do they just not have the motivation to?

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"We found that lonely people are capable of empathizing and making moral decisions, but they may not have the intention or motivation to," said Jiao. "But when empathy levels increase, we don't see much difference between lonely people and non-lonely people. Lonely people will be more likely to engage in moral behaviors and less likely to engage in immoral behaviors when they feel empathy."

Provided by Binghamton University

Jiao said finding ways to make consumers empathize may motivate them to cut back on wardrobing and other immoral behaviors.

"Those people who are returning TVs or golf clubs or dresses may be experiencing loneliness," she said. "If they can see how much work they're creating for employees, or if they can see how much money this behavior is costing the company, they may start empathizing, which could result in them being less likely to return the products."

How exactly to induce empathy in consumers isn't explored in Jiao's research, but it is something she's hoping to continue looking into.

Jiao also found that while increasing empathy in lonely people can result in a higher moral identity and better moral decision making, this was not the case for non-lonely people.

"For non-[lonely people](#), it doesn't matter if you try to increase their empathy or not, because by nature their empathy level is already high. Theoretically, adding even more empathy on top of that isn't going to result in even better [decision](#) making," said Jiao.

Jiao's paper, "Can Lonely People Behave Morally? The Joint Influence of Loneliness and Empathy on Moral Identity" was published in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

More information: Jinfeng Jenny Jiao et al, Can Lonely People Behave Morally? The Joint Influence of Loneliness and Empathy on Moral Identity, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2018). [DOI:](#)

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