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Title: Self-interest and Selfishness in Consumer Decision Making

Abstract: Consumers are increasingly facing trade-offs between options that are purely self-interested and options that entail a costly prosocial benefit. In a series of controlled experiments, I show how the choice between an option that benefits the self and an option that benefits others presents a “lose-lose” situation for consumers. In particular, if a consumer selects a self-interested option, he may feel self-reproach for prioritizing himself above others. However, if a consumer selects a prosocial option, he fails to reap the benefits inherent in self-interest. I demonstrate that imposing self-interest (a reward) leads to greater happiness with an outcome than choosing between self-interest and a prosocial option (a charity donation). By removing agency, consumers can enjoy the pleasure of self-interest without feeling selfish. I further explore additional factors that influence when consumers do or do not feel selfish with their own self-interested behavior.