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Projecting Lower Competence to Maintain Moral Warmth in the Avoidance of Prosocial Requests

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When faced with prosocial requests, consumers face a difficult decision between taking on the request's burden or appearing unwarm (unkind, uncaring). We propose that the desire to refuse such requests while protecting a morally warm image leads consumers to under-represent their competence. Although consumers care strongly about being viewed as competent, five studies showed that they downplayed their competence to sidestep a prosocial request. This effect occurred across both self-reported and behavioral displays of competence. Further, the downplaying competence effect only occurred when facing an undesirable prosocial request, not a similarly undesirable proself request. The final studies showed that people specifically downplayed competence and not warmth. We further distinguished between social warmth (e.g., humor) and moral warmth (e.g., kindness), showing that when competence, social warmth, and moral warmth were all requisite skills for a prosocial task, people downplayed competence and social warmth more than moral warmth. These findings underscore that although people care strongly about being viewed as competent, they willingly trade off competence evaluations if evaluations of warmth—particularly moral warmth—are at risk.

Keywords Prosocial; Self-evaluation; Modesty; Skill; Competence; Warmth

Introduction

Prosocial behavior is important to nearly all consumers and to marketers of charitable and other non-profit organizations, who often place burdensome prosocial requests on consumers. When facing a burdensome prosocial request—that is, a request to help others—consumers often face an unpleasant tradeoff between sacrificing their time and seeming less kind and caring (Ariely, Bracha, & Meier, 2009; Dunn, Ashton-James, Hanson, & Aknin, 2010; O'Keefe & Figgé, 1999; Schaumberg & Wiltermuth, 2014). We ask whether, while attempting to protect an image of themselves as morally warm (e.g., being kind, caring, and empathetic), consumers might sacrifice another important image—their own competence—as a way to justify avoidance of burdensome prosocial

requests. That is, we propose that despite the pervasive desire to seem competent (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Dunning, Johnson, Ehrlinger, & Kruger, 2003; Sedikides, 1993; Taylor & Lobel, 1989), consumers may prefer that their refusal of prosocial requests be attributed to their incompetence (e.g., lacking the necessary skills)—allowing their desire to be perceived as morally warm to outweigh their desire to be perceived as competent.

Conceptual Background

The Motivation to Display Competence

Our proposition stands in contrast to literature that has underscored how important it is for people to feel skilled and competent (Sedikides, 1993; Taylor & Lobel, 1989) and to be viewed as competent by others (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Judge & Bretz, 1994; Rudman, 1998; Stevens & Kristof, 1995; Turnley & Bolino, 2001). We define competence consistent with prior literature (e.g., Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Wojciszke, 1994; Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski,

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1998). As Fiske et al. (2007) stated, "There is no dispute over the competence label; these traits include clever, competent, creative, efficient, foresighted, ingenious, intelligent and knowledgeable" (p. 77). The motivation to feel competent is so pervasive that people often self-enhance and perceive themselves as more competent than they are, a bias that operates across many judgments that people make (Brown, 1986). For instance, people tend to overestimate their skills and abilities across most domains (Dunning et al., 2003). People also view themselves as better than average at an impossible rate (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009) and seek comparisons to lower-performing others when their self-esteem is threatened (Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wills, 1981; Wood, Giordano-Beech, & Ducharme, 1999). Further, being seen by others as competent generally has positive interpersonal consequences. Indeed, a main impression management strategy is self-promotion, in which people play up skills, abilities, and achievements in order to be viewed as competent (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Judge & Bretz, 1994; Rudman, 1998; Stevens & Kristof, 1995; Turnley & Bolino, 2001).

The Motivation to Display Warmth

In addition to competence, warmth is a primary dimension on which people are readily judged. According to prior literature, warmth is defined as encompassing two main kinds of traits: those related to being moral (e.g., empathetic, kind, cooperative) and those related to being sociable (e.g., playful, happy, funny; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014; Kirmani, Hamilton, Thompson, & Lantzy, 2017). Although competence is a fundamental dimension for social evaluation, warmth appears to be the more primary of the two dimensions (Fiske et al., 2007). For instance, people are more sensitive to warmth information, processing it more quickly and more reliably than competence information (Willis & Todorov, 2006; Ybarra, Chan, & Park, 2001). Additionally, judgments of a person's warmth tend to have a greater influence on observers' affective and behavioral reactions than judgments of a person's competence, affecting approach-avoid tendencies (Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1997; Peeters, 2002; Wojciszke et al., 1998). Further, while not the focus of our research, various reasons have been posited for why the primacy of warmth over competence makes sense, including evolutionary reasons (Fiske et al., 2007). Do consumers therefore value their own projected warmth over competence? Focusing on the important consumer context of prosocial requests, we argue that they do.

Maintaining Warmth When Facing Prosocial Requests by Lowering Projected Competence

When consumers face prosocial requests, they can either comply with the request or refuse it. Often, people wish to refuse these requests, as they can be burdensome (Koval, vanDellen, Fitzsimons, & Ranby, 2015; Shaw, Batson, & Todd, 1994) and are often viewed as conveying little personal benefit while having clear personal costs (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2014; Sierksma, Thijs, Verkuyten, & Komter, 2014). Yet, rejecting a prosocial request is not costless either. After refusing to help others, people are perceived as less morally warm—that is, they are seen as more self-interested and less kind or caring. People also often feel ashamed and guilty for coming across to themselves and to others as selfish (Ariely et al., 2009; Dunn et al., 2010; O'Keefe & Figgé, 1999; Schaumberg & Wiltermuth, 2014). Thus, when facing a prosocial request, consumers face an unpleasant tradeoff between their resources and seeming self-interested and uncaring both to themselves and others (Berman & Small, 2012; Dana, Cain, & Dawes, 2006; DellaVigna, List, & Malmendier, 2012; Lin, Schaumberg, & Reich, 2016).

As stated earlier, being seen as warm is particularly important in interpersonal interactions; this is relevant when facing prosocial requests, as complying with a prosocial request would reflect warm traits (e.g., caring, empathetic, kind), whereas refusing it would reflect the opposite. Thus, we suggest that perceptions of consumers' warmth are particularly in danger when facing prosocial requests. Furthermore, drawing from the distinction between moral aspects of warmth (e.g., kindness) and social aspects of warmth (e.g., humor; Goodwin et al., 2014; Kirmani et al., 2017; Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007), we suggest that moral (vs. social) warmth is particularly at risk when people consider rejecting requests in the prosocial context, as moral warmth is related to the motivation to help others. Our research focuses on the fundamental warmth versus competence trade off (Fiske et al., 2007) that we suggest is highly relevant when it comes to rejecting prosocial requests with requisite skills. With this emphasis on warmth, we follow prior theory and distinguish between moral and social aspects of warmth (Goodwin et al., 2014; Kirmani et al., 2017; Leach et al., 2007). We suggest that people might be aware that being perceived as less morally warm (vs. less socially warm) is more harmful to their image, as judgments of moral warmth are

more important than those of social warmth in person perception (Goodwin et al., 2014), and thus people particularly wish to protect that image. Given our focus, we posit that despite the importance of being perceived as competent, consumers can justify their refusal of a prosocial request by attributing it to lower competence (e.g., not having the skills) rather than lower moral warmth (e.g., being less kind), allowing them to circumvent prosocial requests while maintaining an image of moral warmth.

In sum, a large body of literature shows that people care strongly about being viewed as competent and exhibit a strong tendency to self-promote (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Judge & Bretz, 1994; Rudman, 1998; Stevens & Kristof, 1995; Turnley & Bolino, 2001), and even to overestimate their skills and abilities (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Brown, 1986; Kruger & Dunning, 1999). In the present research, however, we bridge the literature on consequences of rejecting prosocial requests (Berman & Small, 2012; Dunn et al., 2010; O’Keefe & Figgé, 1999; Schaumberg & Wiltermuth, 2014) with the literature on the primacy of warmth over competence (Fiske et al., 2007) to hypothesize that consumers willingly sacrifice competence evaluations so that they can reject prosocial requests without sacrificing their image as morally warm.

The Present Research

We predict that when consumers desire to avoid a prosocial request, they will downplay the competence skills relevant for the task. Across studies, we employ different manipulations of the desire to avoid a prosocial request as well as different measures of downplaying competence to provide convergent evidence. Specifically, we manipulate whether participants anticipate that they will face a costly prosocial request (vs. not face the request) prior to reporting their competence skills (Studies 1, 2, 5), whether the request is purely other-focused (vs. offers self-interest; Study 3), and whether the prosocial request will be highly time-consuming (vs. easy; Study 4). We suggest that all of these different ways of inducing the desire to avoid a prosocial request will lead to downplaying the competence skills relevant for the task. Formally:

H1: Consumers will downplay the competence skills relevant for a prosocial task if they desire to avoid or refuse the prosocial request.

Further, our theory suggests that consumers should only be motivated to downplay their competence when rejecting a request would reflect poorly on their moral warmth—that is, when these unpleasant requests are prosocial (i.e., helping others). Thus, this effect should not occur when rejecting a similarly unpleasant—but nonprosocial—request in general (e.g., an unpleasant task that would offer only marginal benefit for the self), as refusing an unpleasant request in itself should not reflect poorly on one’s moral warmth.

H2: Consumers will downplay competence more when the undesirable request is highly prosocial (i.e., helps others), relative to when the undesirable request instead helps the self.

Finally, our theorizing suggests that the reason consumers downplay their competence is to protect their warmth. This theorizing implies that consumers should protect warmth perceptions (especially moral warmth) over competence perceptions, even if warmth is necessary for a prosocial request. For instance, volunteering for a prosocial organization may require competence skills (e.g., writing), social warmth skills (e.g., humor), and moral warmth skills (e.g., empathy). We theorize that participants will downplay competence skills and social warmth skills to a greater extent than moral warmth skills. Formally:

H3: When faced with an undesirable prosocial request, consumers will downplay competence over warmth (and particularly, over moral warmth rather than social warmth).

Our research thus contributes to an understanding of how consumers reconcile their self-interested behaviors with the desire to be seen as warm (particularly, morally warm), by showing how consumers justify refusals of prosocial requests. This research also contributes to the broader literatures on the tradeoffs between warmth and competence (Fiske et al., 2007; Holoien & Fiske, 2013) and the importance of moral (vs. social) warmth in judgment (Goodwin et al., 2014; Kirmani et al., 2017). It also demonstrates a new instantiation of intentional underperformance (e.g., Kidwell & Bennett, 1993; White, Sanbonmatsu, Croyle, & Smittipatana, 2002) discussed further in the General Discussion.

Overview of Studies

Five studies formally test our hypotheses. In Study 1, participants either anticipated a prosocial request

(i.e., helping kids with arts and crafts) or not before they reported their arts and crafts skills (H1). In Study 2, we examined actual persistence on an academic competence task when performing well would provide participants with an unwanted prosocial request (H1). In Study 3, we tested whether people would downplay skills only when they wished to reject a request that was prosocial (rather than self-beneficial; H2). In Study 4, we manipulated whether participants wanted to help or not on a task requiring writing competence and examined whether participants downplayed their competence and also whether participants downplayed their warmth (H3). Study 4 also further expanded in terms of the type of competence measure utilized (i.e., choosing to communicate with words indicating lower vocabulary-based competence). Finally, Study 5 examined whether people differentially downplay their evaluations of competence and warmth when both are relevant to the task. Further, we tested whether people differentially downplay their moral warmth (e.g., being kind and empathetic) and social warmth (e.g., being social and funny). As we argued earlier, in the prosocial context, people should be motivated to maintain their projected moral warmth in particular; it follows that downplaying moral warmth skills would be counterproductive to their goals. Thus, we tested whether people would preserve their moral warmth above and beyond their social warmth and competence (H3).

For all studies, we collected data until we obtained a predetermined sample size and did not analyze data until all data collection was complete. Adults ages 18 years and above located in the United States were eligible to participate, no other independent variables or manipulations were used besides those reported, and no participant observations were excluded from analysis other than the observations specified in the method of Study 1. Finally, all dependent variables are reported. A university institutional review board approved the research.

Study 1: In the Field

In Study 1, we tested our main hypothesis that people downplay their competence when they wish to avoid a prosocial request (H1) in a field setting. We approached people (primarily commuters) waiting at a train station and asked them to evaluate their arts and crafts skills. In one randomly assigned condition, participants were told that we were working

with a local children's charity looking for people who are good at arts and crafts to volunteer a few hours of their time in the upcoming weeks—a burdensome request to the average busy commuter. We hypothesized that, relative to a condition in which participants were simply asked to evaluate their skills, these participants would present their skills as lower so they would be able to justifiably avoid volunteering. Finally, we captured intentions to volunteer at the end of the study; we predicted that those who downplayed their skills would be less likely to show interest in volunteering, as they would presumably feel they had justified their refusal of the request.

Method

Participants and design. The study had a 2 (anticipation of prosocial request: yes, no) groups between-subjects design. Because this study was about volunteering for a local charity, the research assistants (blind to the study hypothesis) collecting data made note when participants told them that the study was not applicable to them (i.e., they either lived too far from the area where the study was being done or would not be in the area where the study was being done in the upcoming weeks). Given the conceptual definition of competence as traits that “include clever, competent, creative, efficient, foresighted, ingenious, intelligent and knowledgeable” (Fiske et al., 2007, p. 77), individuals who gave the reason of not living nearby were not classified as downplaying competence. There were ten such participants, and they were excluded from all analysis. Thus, of the total 118 participants, 108 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 36.97$; 51.9% female) were left in the final sample (results are similar if no participants are excluded from analysis; see Appendix S1).

Procedure. Research assistants blind to the study's hypotheses approached people at a local train station and asked if they would be willing to answer a few questions. People who agreed to participate were then handed a flyer that either said: “We are conducting research for a local children's charity that is looking for people who are good at arts and crafts to volunteer a few hours of their time in the upcoming weeks” (anticipated request condition) or “We are conducting research that is looking to examine people's perceptions of their skills in different domains” (no anticipated request condition). The flyer that participants were handed was pulled from a stack of randomly sorted flyers and was folded in half so that research assistants

did not know which flyer each participant had received.

After participants read their randomly assigned flyer, the research assistants asked them to respond to our dependent variable: "How would you say you are at arts and crafts on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 is very bad and 7 is very good?"

Finally, to gauge volunteering intentions, all participants were provided with a second flyer that read: "A local children's charity is looking for people who are good at arts and crafts to volunteer a few hours of their time in the upcoming weeks. Would you be willing to be contacted further about volunteering for this charity? If yes, please provide your email address to the researcher." See Appendix S1 for flyers used and stimuli for all studies.

Results

Skill evaluation. As hypothesized (H1), people represented themselves as significantly less skilled in arts and crafts in the condition in which they anticipated being asked for help ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.67$) versus did not ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.61$; $t(106) = 2.53$, $p = .013$, $d = 0.49$).

Downstream likelihood of volunteering. A binomial logistic regression revealed that those who anticipated being asked for help provided their email addresses at a nonsignificantly higher rate (50.0%) than those who did not anticipate being asked for help (41.1%), $B = -0.36$, $SE = 0.39$, $p = .35$. However, when we added skill ratings into the regression, skill level positively predicted likelihood of giving an email address, $B = 0.33$, $SE = 0.13$, $p = .011$, and the effect of condition became stronger, $B = -.65$, $SE = 0.42$, $p = .123$, suggesting a suppression effect. Given that indirect effects can exist in the absence of direct effects (Rucker, Preacher, Tormala, & Petty, 2011), we conducted a bootstrapping mediation analysis (Hayes, 2013) to test the indirect effect of condition on volunteering via skill level. Skill level mediated the effect of condition on volunteering, [95% CI: 0.008, 0.126], suggesting that those who anticipated being asked for help reported a lower skill level, which led them to be less likely to volunteer, supporting our prediction that lowering one's competence can provide a justification for not volunteering.

Discussion

Study 1 showed in a field setting that people were more likely to downplay their skill or ability when they anticipated (vs. did not) that a prosocial

organization was going to ask them for help involving that skill or ability, supporting H1. Further, there was an indirect effect such that those who anticipated being asked for help downplayed their skills and abilities, which was then linked with being less likely to volunteer. We suggest that this pattern occurred at least partly because those who downplayed their skills felt adequately justified in refusing the prosocial request, as they protected their moral warmth by attributing their refusal to their incompetence.

Although not our focus, the lack of direct effect of prosocial request anticipation condition on volunteering suggests an opposing force contributing to the effect of condition on volunteering, causing a suppression effect. For instance, perhaps being exposed to the request twice, rather than once, increased compliance in the anticipation condition. Thus, we eliminate this possibility in future studies, exposing all participants to information about the request the same number of times. Additionally, Study 1's results are subject to an alternative explanation that skill evaluations in the anticipation condition were affected by being told about the volunteering task (e.g., they could have imagined a specific type of arts and crafts activity at which they felt less skilled). We thus employ cleaner control conditions in subsequent studies.

Study 2: A Behavioral Measure of Competence to Avoid Prosocial Requests

Study 2 further tested H1 but utilized a behavioral measure of displaying competence—persistence on an academic competence task. Additionally, we examined a situation in which we emphasized to participants that a prosocial request is possible but avoidable. Based on research suggesting that people would prefer not to be asked for their help at all (Lin et al., 2016), Study 2 tested our prediction that people may purposely spend less time on a competence task when they believe that doing well will mean being faced with a prosocial request that they do not want to accept. Finally, we employed cleaner control conditions than Study 1 by exposing all participants to information about a charity prior to gauging competence.

Method

Participants and design. Participants ($N = 200$; $M_{\text{age}} = 36.39$; 50.0% female, 49.5% male, 0.5% other) from Amazon Mechanical Turk completed this

study at the end of an unrelated study. This study had a 3 (benefit for helping: no, high, control) groups between-subjects design.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to a control condition, a prosocial opportunity with no financial benefit condition (making the prosocial task undesirable), or a prosocial opportunity with financial benefit condition (making the prosocial task relatively desirable). All participants read that they would take part in an academic competence task. They further read that this task was related to a separate extra feedback task on a charitable organization's informational pamphlet to increase awareness about poverty in Africa (i.e., a prosocial task). Then, we manipulated whether participants desired to avoid engaging in this prosocial task or not. In the control condition, participants were told that they would not have the opportunity to participate in the extra charitable pamphlet feedback task, but rather that the charitable organization simply wanted to gauge the academic competence of panel members. Thus, they did not anticipate facing a prosocial request whatsoever. In the prosocial opportunity with high financial benefit condition, participants were told that if they performed well on the academic competence task, they would have the voluntary opportunity to participate in the extra charitable pamphlet feedback task (i.e., the pamphlet feedback task would be optional) and would receive a \$1.00 bonus payment if they agreed to do the extra pamphlet feedback task. In this case, participants anticipated facing a prosocial request, but it was desirable. In the prosocial opportunity with no financial benefit condition, participants were told that if they performed well on the academic competence task, they would have the voluntary opportunity to participate in the extra charitable pamphlet feedback task but would not receive any additional payment if they agreed to do so. In this condition, we anticipated that participants would desire to avoid the prosocial request and thus exhibit decreased competence, as evidenced by lower persistence on the academic competence task. In all conditions, participants were told they would receive information on how well they performed on the academic competence task.

All participants were then shown the academic competence task, a 10-item Remote Associates Task (Bowden & Jung-Beeman, 2003), in which participants view three words and try to identify a word that is associated with all three. We designed the task to have five easy questions

(e.g., "cream," "skate," "water," [answer: "ice"]), and five moderately difficult questions (e.g., "force," "line," "mail" [answer: "air"]). Participants were told that they had unlimited time to solve the ten questions but that they did not have to complete all ten questions to do well because the questions ranged in difficulty. The task was designed such that participants would not be able to solve all questions. Thus, task persistence (measured by how many seconds participants spent on these questions) acted as our main dependent variable.

Participants were then told how many items they answered correctly. Finally, those who were not in the control group read, "We currently have enough participants helping with the pamphlet task, and therefore, we do not need more participants." Thus, no participants actually completed the second task of providing pamphlet feedback. At the end of the study, participants filled out the contingencies of self-worth subscales for virtue, academic competence, and approval from others as potential moderators (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). In analyses examining whether each subscale moderated the effects presented, there were no significant moderations of the effects below, and thus we do not discuss them further.

Results

A one-way ANOVA on time spent on the academic competence task was significant ($F(2, 197) = 5.77, p = .004$). As predicted, participants spent significantly less time (in seconds) on the competence task in the prosocial opportunity with no financial benefit condition ($M = 133.76, SD = 95.30$) than in the control condition ($M = 184.96, SD = 129.44; p = .014, d = 0.45$) or in the prosocial opportunity with financial benefit condition ($M = 200.67, SD = 127.79; p = .001, d = 0.59$). There was no difference in time spent between the control condition and the prosocial opportunity with financial benefit condition ($p = .444$). These results are consistent with log-transformed time spent as the dependent variable.

We also examined the number of correct answers on the competence task. Unexpectedly, there was a significant difference ($F(2, 197) = 3.86, p = .023$). Participants in the prosocial opportunity with financial benefit condition answered more questions correctly ($M = 6.48, SD = 2.78$) than those in the prosocial opportunity with no financial benefit condition ($M = 5.39, SD = 2.61; t(197) = 2.36, p = .019, d = 0.40$) and the control condition ($M = 5.43,$

$SD = 2.26$; $t(197) = 2.44$, $p = .016$, $d = 0.41$). There was no difference between the no financial benefit condition and the control condition, $p = .93$. As this task was designed to have five easy (and five moderately difficult) questions, we had expected the mean correct answers across conditions to be approximately five, such that persistence would be the differentiator across conditions. The finding that the mean correct answers was higher in the prosocial opportunity with financial benefit condition was somewhat unexpected. When we examined the distribution of correct answers across conditions, however, we observed that the number of participants getting all 10 questions correct was significantly higher in the prosocial opportunity with financial benefit condition ($n = 14$) than in the prosocial opportunity with no financial benefit condition ($n = 5$; logistic regression: $p = .035$) and the control condition ($n = 4$; logistic regression: $p = .017$). This suggests that some participants in the financial benefit condition may have cheated by looking up answers online. Thus, we argue that focusing on the significantly higher persistence in the prosocial request with no financial benefit condition and control condition is most instructive.

Discussion

Study 2 provides further support for H1. People not only under-represent their skills in prosocial domains (Study 1), but also persist less on tasks meant to reflect competence when they believe that performing well could lead them to face an undesirable (yet still voluntary) prosocial request (Study 2). This reflects the possibility that people put in less effort to help others (e.g., reviewing papers) when they think that doing well will qualify them, but not obligate them, to help more (e.g., more review requests). Thus, people might sabotage their own performance when they believe performing well will be “punished” with more costly or difficult requests.

Interestingly, the findings of Study 2 bear some analogy to the role of moral hazard in contract design from the economics literature but extend this concept to a voluntary context. In the employment context, if employees anticipate that high performance will be costly (e.g., that it will lead to harder work assignments), they may underperform to hide their type from the firm (Bolton & Dewatripon, 2005). However, consumers are not obligated to help charitable organizations. Unlike contract theory models, which generally assume that people will only shirk on their work if they would be

assigned more difficult work, people in this study were made aware that they would be able to refuse the prosocial request. This implies that consumers are aware that they can decline help requests yet still underperform, suggesting that even a request for help imposes a cost—that is, refusing a request for help reflects poorly on one’s warmth (specifically, one’s moral warmth).

Finally, we should note that our context was private, and consumers’ behaviors were not observed by peers. When underperforming carries higher reputational and other costs (e.g., not being perceived as a “team player” and thus being passed over for a promotion), it is possible people would simply comply with undesirable prosocial requests, or make other justifications to not engage in them, rather than to sacrifice their competence.

Study 3: Prosocial Versus Proself Requests

Our theory is centered on undesirable prosocial requests, as we posit that people feel compelled to downplay competence for such requests because denying them would shed light on their moral warmth. By contrast, an undesirable request that would mainly help oneself would not shed light on one’s moral warmth. Whereas the desire to help was manipulated in Study 2, we made the request equally undesirable in Study 3, but manipulated whether the request was a prosocial or a proself one. Thus, Study 3 tests H2: people will downplay their competence when faced with an undesirable prosocial request but not when faced with a similarly undesirable proself request. Additionally, to enhance applicability to the consumer context beyond charitable organizations soliciting help, we conducted this study in the context of an online review company offering either proself or prosocial incentives for writing a (burdensome) review for the company. This context has ecologic validity as companies sometimes offer incentives for writing reviews (e.g., the chance to win gift cards) and as some companies have begun offering prosocial incentives or rewards to consumers for performing activities that benefit the company (e.g., AmazonSmile; Liu, Lamberton, & Haws, 2015).

Method

Participants and design. Participants ($N = 252$; $M_{\text{age}} = 34.77$; 49.6% female, 50.4% male) from Amazon Mechanical Turk completed this study, which

was attached to the end of an unrelated study. This study had a 3 (beneficiary of task: control, prosocial, proself) groups between-subjects design.

Procedure. Participants in all three randomly assigned conditions read that there was an online shopping review company collecting reviews. All participants read that the review should be at least 300 words and would take approximately 20 minutes to write. In the control condition, participants additionally read that the company was planning to ask future Amazon Mechanical Turk workers to write this review and that they personally were not being asked to write the review; instead, the company wanted to get an accurate view of how consumers view their skills at writing reviews. In the proself task condition, participants read that the company was asking them to write this review but that it was completely optional to write this review. They also read that writing the review would result in a \$0.25 bonus to themselves. Thus, although participants would not want to engage in the task (as a \$0.25 bonus for 20 minutes is a highly undesirable rate for Amazon Mechanical Turk), they would not feel that refusing the request would reflect poorly on their moral warmth. In the prosocial task condition, participants were told the same information as in the proself task condition except that they were told writing the review would result in \$0.25 being given to a charitable organization (Feeding America). Thus, refusing the request would be a refusal to help others, reflecting poorly on their moral warmth. To ensure that participants read the information correctly in the two noncontrol conditions, participants were then asked, "Who would benefit from you writing this review?" (*A charity, Me*).

All participants then responded to the two-item dependent measure of competence ($r = 0.79$, $p < .001$): "How good are your writing skills?" (1 = *extremely poor* to 7 = *extremely good*); "How qualified are you to write this review?" (1 = *not at all qualified* to 7 = *extremely qualified*).

Finally, to check that the task of writing the review was similarly unappealing in both the proself and prosocial conditions, all participants responded to three items ($\alpha = 0.96$): "To you, how appealing or unappealing of a task is writing this 300-word review?" (1 = *very unappealing*, 7 = *very appealing*); "To you, how desirable or undesirable of a task is writing this 300-word review?" (1 = *very undesirable*, 7 = *very desirable*); and "How much do you want to write this review?" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much so*).

Finally, for consistency with the cover story and to make this a real request, those in the proself and prosocial request conditions were asked whether they would or would not write the review, and those who agreed to write wrote a review. In the proself conditions, these participants indeed received an additional \$0.25 bonus payment, and in the prosocial conditions, a \$0.25 donation was made to Feeding America for each participant.

Results

A one-way ANOVA on writing competence was significant ($F(2, 249) = 5.68$, $p = .004$). As predicted, participants indicated that their writing competence was lower in the undesirable prosocial request condition ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.72$) than in the control condition ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.57$; $p = .003$, $d = 0.47$), replicating our basic effect (H1). Further, participants indicated greater writing competence in the undesirable proself request condition ($M = 4.92$, $SD = 1.69$) than in the undesirable prosocial request condition ($p = .005$, $d = 0.43$), supporting H2. Finally, participants indicated similar writing competence in the undesirable proself request condition as in the control condition ($p = .866$, $d = 0.02$).

Finally, to check that the review writing task was perceived to be similarly unappealing in both the proself and prosocial conditions, we conducted *t*-tests on the task appealingness composite. Importantly, participants found the request to be similarly undesirable in the prosocial condition ($M = 1.84$, $SD = 1.28$) and the proself condition ($M = 1.95$, $SD = 1.48$), $t(165) = 0.52$, $p = .606$, $d = 0.08$. The task was perceived to be more desirable in the control condition than in either request condition ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.88$; $ps < .001$), likely because no compensation amount was specified, such that participants could have inferred a higher compensation amount.

Discussion

Study 3 showed that participants only downplayed their competence when faced with an undesirable prosocial request and not when faced with a similarly undesirable proself request. These findings support H2 and are consistent with our theory that prosocial requests pose a particular tension in that rejecting a request (for which one is qualified) places evaluations of moral warmth at risk.

Study 4: Downplaying Competence But Not Warmth

In the studies thus far, we assessed displayed competence to test for our focal effect. However, it is unclear whether the desire to avoid a prosocial request requiring competence leads consumers to downplay all positive traits, even warmth. According to H3, consumers will downplay competence selectively to protect their projected warmth. Thus, Study 4 tested whether, when consumers seek to avoid a prosocial request requiring writing competence, they would convey less writing competence but not less warmth. Additionally, to further broaden the range of ways in which we gauge downplaying competence, we examined a different form of downplaying skills, other than gauging skill estimates (Studies 1, 3) or task persistence (Study 2): choosing to write with less competent words.

Method

Participants and design. Participants ($N = 198$; $M_{\text{age}} = 34.48$; 51.5% female, 48.0% male, 0.5% other) from Amazon Mechanical Turk completed this study. This study had a 2 (desire to help: control, no) groups between-subjects design.

Procedure. The stimuli and procedure were adapted from Holoiien and Fiske (2013). All participants read the following: "Imagine that you recently joined a book club. Every week, one member writes an email with their thoughts about the book. You know that the book club is currently looking to ask someone to be the writing secretary

and write the newsletter for the book club group. The writing secretary is someone who needs to have very strong, competent writing skills." In the control condition, there was no further information provided. In the desire-not-to-help condition, participants were also told, "Being writing secretary will take a lot of extra work each week so it's not a very desirable position."

All participants were then shown a list of 24 words (order randomized for each participant) and asked to "choose 12 of the following 24 words that you would use in your email message about the book." The 24 words were previously selected and pre-tested in the Amazon Mechanical Turk participant pool by Holoiien and Fiske (2013) to include six high-competence/high-warmth words (e.g., euphoric), six high-competence/low-warmth words (e.g., melancholy), six low-competence/high-warmth words (e.g., happy), and six low-competence/low-warmth words (e.g., sad). These 24 particular words were chosen by Holoiien and Fiske (2013), who stated that in operationalizing warmth and competence, "warmth was conveyed by positivity, and competence was conveyed by vocabulary sophistication" (p. 35). Thus, for example, happy is considered high in positivity (i.e., warmth) but low in vocabulary sophistication (i.e., competence), as confirmed by a pre-test they conducted (table 1 in Holoiien & Fiske, 2013; see Figure 1 for dependent measure calculation information). Finally, participants responded to a manipulation check question: "Did you want to be the writing secretary for the book club?" (1 = *definitely did not want to be the writing secretary*, 7 = *definitely wanted to be the writing secretary*).

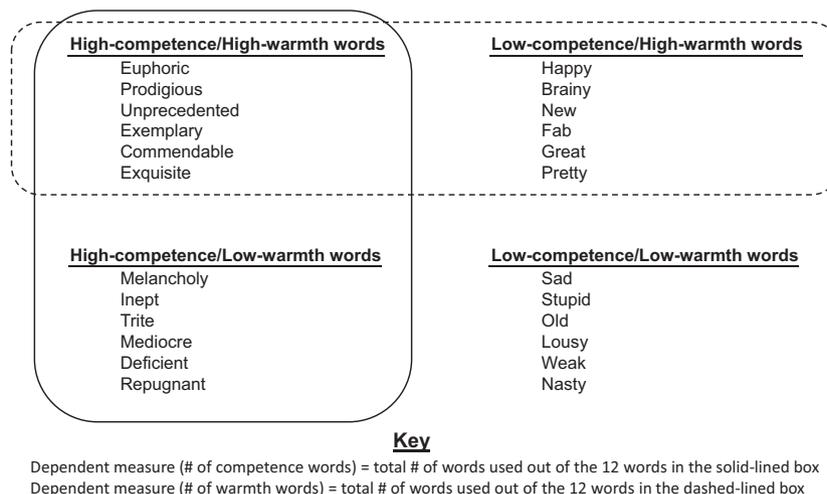


Figure 1. Study 4: Diagram indicating how the two dependent measures (No. of competence words, No. of warmth words) were calculated.

Results

Manipulation check (desire to be the writing secretary). Participants indicated that they wanted to be the writing secretary less in the desire-not-to-help condition ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.85$) than in the control condition ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.93$), $t(196) = -3.60$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.51$.

Dependent measures (No. of competence words, No. of warmth words). First, we calculated two dependent measures for each participant: the total number of competence words used and the total number of warmth words used (see Figure 1 for a diagram illustrating how each is calculated). Given these two dependent measures per participant, we treated these two dependent measures as a within-subjects factor in a 2 (desire to help [between-subjects factor]: control, no) \times 2 (word type [within-subjects factor]: competence, warmth) mixed ANOVA.

This analysis revealed a significant interaction, $F(1, 196) = 15.29$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.07$. See Figure 2. Follow-up simple-effects tests showed that as predicted, participants in the desire-not-to-help condition used fewer words conveying competence ($M = 6.21$, $SD = 2.29$) relative to participants in the control condition ($M = 7.61$, $SD = 2.45$; $t(196) = -4.16$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.59$). In contrast, participants in the desire-not-to-help condition did not use fewer words conveying warmth relative to participants in the control condition; if anything, they used directionally more words conveying warmth

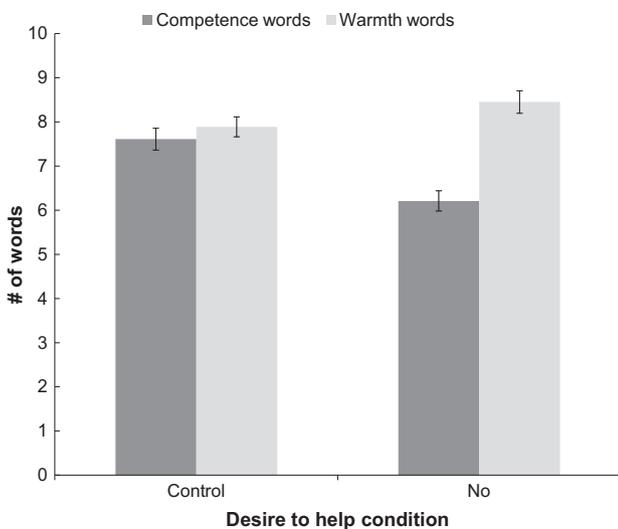


Figure 2. Study 4: Number of competence and warmth words used in the control condition and in the desire-not-to-help condition. Note. Graph depicts means and standard errors of the mean.

($M = 8.45$, $SD = 2.55$) relative to participants in the control condition ($M = 7.89$, $SD = 2.24$; $t(196) = 1.65$, $p = .101$, $d = 0.23$).

Discussion

Study 4 replicated the basic effect, showing that when consumers desire to avoid a prosocial request (i.e., the request is particularly unpleasant), they downplay their request-relevant skills (H1). Further, Study 4 contributes beyond the prior studies in two ways. First, Study 4 utilized a different type of displayed competence measure: the types of words selected for an email message, rather than direct reports of skill level (Studies 1, 3) or task persistence (Study 2). This suggests that people might attempt to display low competence in subtle ways to signal that they are not qualified to engage in prosocial behavior. Second, Study 4 showed that participants downplayed competence but did not similarly downplay warmth in response to an undesirable prosocial request. If anything, they directionally increased their warmth. This supports H3: consumers downplay competence over warmth when facing prosocial requests.

However, although warmth is generally necessary when engaging in prosocial requests (i.e., only those who are kind, generous, empathetic, etc., tend to engage in such requests), this was not made explicit in Study 4. Thus, in Study 5, we test whether people will downplay competence more than warmth even when warmth is explicitly required for the prosocial task at hand. Furthermore, Study 5 differentiates between social warmth and moral warmth.

Study 5: Protecting Projected Moral Warmth

In Study 5, we further tested H3 by investigating how consumers trade off projected competence and warmth when they are both explicitly relevant to the task. Additionally, we tested whether consumers differentially downplay their projected moral warmth (e.g., being kind and empathetic) and social warmth (e.g., being social and funny). We argue that consumers would trade off their competence to preserve their projected warmth, particularly warmth as it is related to their moral character. Thus, we expected that consumers would preserve their moral warmth above and beyond their social warmth and their competence.

Procedure

Participants and design. Participants ($N = 670$; $M_{\text{age}} = 36.43$, 3 missing or impossibly high age; 49.10% male, 50.30% female, 0.6% other or missing gender) from Amazon Mechanical Turk completed this study, which had a 2 (request for help [between-subjects factor]: yes, no) \times 3 (skill category [within-subjects factor]: moral warmth, social warmth, writing competence) mixed design.

Method. Participants were randomly assigned to a control (no request for help) or prosocial request condition. Participants read: "We are collaborating with a nonprofit organization whose goal is to motivate at-risk youth to stay in school. This organization is collecting essays for the students. If you agree to write the essay, there will be more instructions, including essay prompts." In the prosocial request condition, participants were asked if they would be willing to write the essay. They additionally read that it was optional but would be helpful to the organization, that it would take approximately five minutes, and that there would be no additional payment associated with the task. In the control condition, participants read that they were not being asked to write the essay, but instead that the organization was trying to get an accurate view of their skills. They then read that the essay would take five minutes—this information was given to ensure that participants imagined a similar task across the two conditions.

All participants were then told that the following skills were necessary to write the essay (presented in random order): "empathy and kindness skills" (moral warmth), "social and humor skills" (social warmth) and "writing and vocabulary skills" (writing competence). Participants then responded to six items corresponding to two items each for the three skill categories, rating how good they were at understanding and sharing others' thoughts and feelings (i.e., at being empathetic), being considerate and kind, being sociable, being funny and humorous, writing persuasively, and writing with strong vocabulary skills (e.g., using a wide range of words, using advanced words; 1 = *extremely bad*, 7 = *extremely good*). A factor analysis (principal component analysis, varimax rotation) confirmed three factors: moral warmth (2 items: $r = .74$, $p < .001$), social warmth (2 items: $r = .51$, $p < .001$), and competence (2 items: $r = .64$, $p < .001$).

Finally, for consistency with the cover story, those in the request condition were asked whether they would like to write the essay, and those who agreed to write wrote a short essay in response to a

prompt of their choosing regarding their experience in school.

Results

We ran a mixed effects model, including random effects for participants (to control for repeated observations), regressing reported skill level on skill category (moral warmth, social warmth, and writing competence), request condition (prosocial request vs. control), and their 2-way interaction (using "lmerTest" package [Kuznetsova, Brockhoff, & Christensen, 2014] in R statistical software [R Core Team, 2014]; note: mixed models often yield noninteger degrees of freedom). We found a significant interaction, $F(2, 1336) = 3.46$, $p = .032$; see Figure 3. To decompose the interaction, we compared the effect of the request condition between each of the three skill categories. The effect of the request condition on moral warmth was significantly different from the effect of the request condition on writing competence, $B = 0.29$, $t(1336) = 2.55$, $p = .011$, and marginally different from the effect of the request condition on social warmth, $B = 0.21$, $t(1336) = 1.84$, $p = .067$. The effects of the request condition on social warmth and writing competence were not different from each other, $B = -.08$, $t(1336) = -.72$, $p = .47$.

Next, we examined the simple effects of request condition for each skill category. People represented their competence as lower when asked to engage in prosocial behavior ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 1.54$) than when not asked ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.26$), $B = 0.47$, $t(1486.30) = 4.45$, $p < .001$. People also represented themselves as lower in social warmth when asked to engage in prosocial behavior ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 1.44$) than when not asked ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.34$), $B = 0.39$, $t(1486.30) = 3.68$, $p < .001$. However, people only represented themselves as marginally lower in moral warmth when asked to engage in prosocial behavior ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.36$) than when not asked ($M = 5.51$, $SD = 1.26$), $B = 0.18$, $t(1486.30) = 1.70$, $p = .09$. In the context of the interaction analyses, the effect of request condition on moral warmth was significantly weaker than on competence, and marginally weaker than on social warmth.

Discussion

In Study 5, we found that people downplayed their competence and social warmth when faced with a prosocial request that required those skills, but that they did not downplay their moral warmth

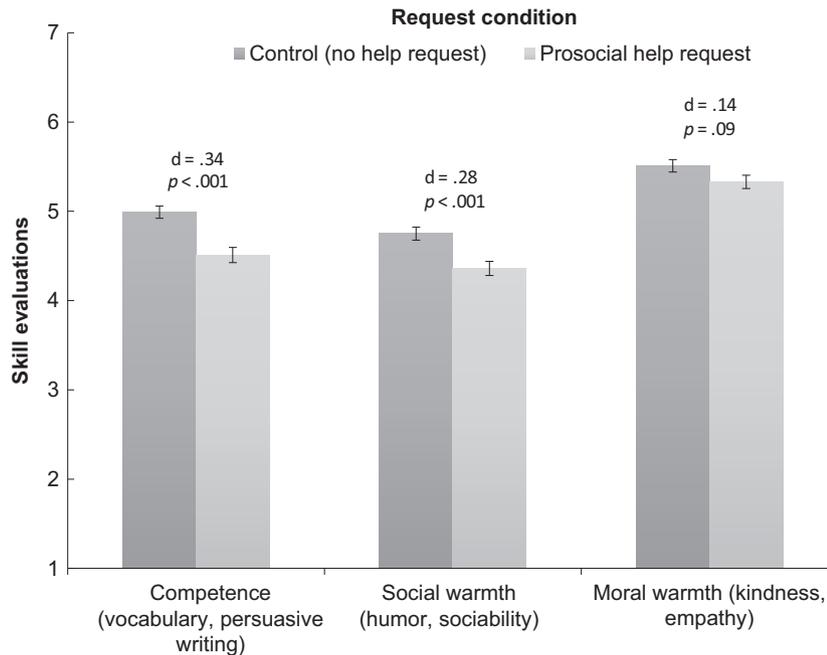


Figure 3. Study 5: Displayed competence, social warmth, and moral warmth in both request conditions (when competence, social warmth, and moral warmth are all skills useful for helping). *Note.* Graph depicts means and standard errors of the mean. Cohen's *d* and *p*-values corresponding to the simple effects of request condition on each type of skill are also reported.

to the same extent. These findings support H3 and are consistent with our theorizing that the downplaying of one's competence when faced with undesirable prosocial requests stems from a desire to project an image of oneself as warm, and specifically as morally warm. People were not willing to sacrifice their projected moral warmth perceptions to avoid a prosocial request, while being willing to sacrifice their projected social warmth. This suggests that when trading off warmth and competence perceptions, people indeed prioritize warmth over competence, but it is specifically moral warmth that matters most.

General Discussion

Five studies conducted in different contexts (four including actual rather than hypothetical behavior, one of which was conducted in the field) showed that consumers downplay their competence to avoid prosocial requests. In Study 1, participants in the field evaluated their skills as lower when they anticipated that they would be asked to use those skills to help a charitable organization. In Study 2, participants spent less time on a competence task when they believed that good performance would qualify them for a prosocial opportunity that they

would want to refuse. In Study 3, participants only downplayed their competence in response to prosocial requests and not for similarly undesirable proself requests, providing evidence that our effect is due to a desire to project moral warmth. In Study 4, participants downplayed their competence in a different way (using less competent words), but did not downplay their warmth when they wanted to avoid a prosocial request. Finally, in Study 5, when competence, social warmth, and moral warmth were all requisite skills for a prosocial request, participants selectively downplayed competence and social warmth more than moral warmth. In sum, we show that when consumers are faced with undesirable prosocial requests, they wish to attribute their refusal to their lack of competence (e.g., "I wouldn't be good at that") rather than to their lack of moral warmth (e.g., "I just don't want to help"). Thus, the desire to be perceived as morally warm outweighed the desire to be perceived as competent (and also as socially warm).

Theoretical Contributions

These findings contribute to understanding when consumers' communication and behaviors may reflect the primacy of the warmth dimension over the competence dimension (Fiske et al., 2007), and

further, the primacy of the moral warmth dimension in particular (Goodwin et al., 2014; Leach et al., 2007). While prior work shows that people place particular weight on moral warmth when evaluating social others (Goodwin et al., 2014; Leach et al., 2007) and on competence when evaluating service providers (Kirmani et al., 2017), our work shows that people may intuit the weight placed on moral warmth in the social evaluation context and prioritize their own display of moral warmth when responding to undesirable prosocial requests.

Our research also contributes to work on how consumers justify avoidance of prosocial requests. Research has found that consumers reject prosocial requests by adjusting perceptions of and feelings toward help-seekers (e.g., the deservingness of the help-seeker; Exley, 2016; Shaw et al., 1994) or the competence of the help-seeker (e.g., the charity's level of overhead; Gneezy, Keenan, & Gneezy, 2014). Our research asks whether consumers might sacrifice another important image—their own competence. We thus identified another route through which people may reject or avoid prosocial requests: altering evaluations of their *own* ability to be helpful to help-seekers. Whereas adjusting one's feelings toward help-seekers seems to effectively serve self-interested motivations—avoiding prosocial behavior while protecting one's self-views—downplaying one's competence seems less intuitive. That is, people appear willing to incur a cost on their projected competence in order to avoid a potential cost on their moral warmth. This tendency also suggests that rewarding hard work with the voluntary opportunity to perform more work is not incentive compatible, as people persist less when they believe high performance will lead to an undesirable voluntary request (Study 2).

Our boundary conditions also provided evidence for our theory. Study 3 shows that the downplaying competence effect only occurs for undesirable prosocial requests, not for similarly undesirable proself requests. Presumably, rejection of a prosocial request places evaluations of one's moral warmth at risk (whereas rejection of a proself request does not) such that downplaying one's ability to help is one way to mitigate that risk. Our distinction between proself and prosocial incentives contributes to prior work on responses to these different kinds of incentives and rewards. Although prior work examines their differential effectiveness (Ariely et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2015; Osterhus, 1997), we focused on the case when a request is highly undesirable, showing that prosocial and proself incentives elicit different ways of refusing the

request. Specifically, prosocial (vs. proself) incentives are likely to elicit lack of competence as a reason for refusal.

Further supporting our theory, Study 5 built on work on the distinction between moral warmth and social warmth (Goodwin et al., 2014; Kirmani et al., 2017; Leach et al., 2007) to show that when both kinds of warmth, along with competence in a traditional nonwarmth domain (writing), are requisite skills, people downplay both writing competence and social warmth more than moral warmth. Collectively, these studies indicate that consumers particularly aim to protect evaluations of their moral warmth in the face of undesirable prosocial requests.

It is also interesting to consider the present work in light of other work reporting social reasons for underperformance. For instance, White et al. (2002) found evidence of “socially motivated underachievement,” wherein participants underperformed when concerned about hurting the feelings of a likable confederate who failed at a task and could observe the participant's performance. However, in the case of socially motivated underachievement, people self-sacrificed to help others (i.e., *for* a prosocial reason) rather than to avoid helping others as in our research. Additionally, other research finds evidence of the “propensity to withhold effort” (Kidwell & Bennett, 1993), wherein people underperform within work groups in which they can shirk their duties, loaf, or free ride on others' efforts. Similar to this prior work, we find that people withhold effort to avoid working hard. However, in our work, people specifically wish to maintain their perceptions of moral warmth, rather than to simply shirk off their duties, which likely makes people appear less morally warm (e.g., less helpful). Our research builds on this past research that shows prosocial (protecting others' feelings; White et al., 2002) and self-interested (shirking duties; Kidwell & Bennett, 1993) reasons for underperformance: namely, people can underperform to appear prosocial, but to act out of self-interest.

Directions for Future Research

We focused on the classic warmth and competence dimensions as they are argued to be the universal dimensions of social cognition (Fiske et al., 2007) and as we suggest they are highly relevant when it comes to rejecting prosocial requests with requisite skills. Although warmth is often conceptualized as inclusive of moral character (Fiske et al., 2007), we further separated moral warmth from

social warmth (Goodwin et al., 2014; Kirmani et al., 2017; Leach et al., 2007). However, we did not consider characteristics relating to moral character that did not overlap with warmth (e.g., being courageous, principled, and fair; Goodwin et al., 2014; Kirmani et al., 2017). Consistent with prior research (Goodwin et al., 2014), consumers valued moral warmth more than social warmth in our research. However, prior research also shows that moral traits that do not overlap with warmth can be valued even more than moral warmth (Goodwin et al., 2014). Thus, a key question is whether consumers wish to maintain their moral warmth in particular or if this effect reflects a general desire to protect their overarching moral character. We contend that engaging in prosocial behavior mainly reflects moral traits related to warmth (e.g., being giving, kind, helpful, and cooperative). Indeed, prior research has characterized authentic prosocial motivation as reflecting a true concern for others (Barasch, Levine, Berman, & Small, 2014). These researchers define moral character in the prosocial context as having “altruism-relevant” traits, which resemble moral warmth traits (e.g., nice, sincere); they exclude “altruism-irrelevant” moral traits, which resemble nonwarm moral traits (e.g., honest, righteous). Thus, although they do not use the warm/nonwarm terms, their focus on altruism-relevant traits supports our focus on moral warmth. However, engaging in prosocial behavior may reflect on other moral traits secondarily (e.g., being principled). Future research should test whether consumers believe their nonwarm moral traits are also at stake when they turn down prosocial requests, and if this also influences projected competence.

The present research offers several other future research directions. First, do consumers believe their own lower competence evaluations and performance, and how do their competence evaluations compare to reality? Given that people’s self-views are generally enhanced (e.g., Brown, 1986), it is possible that the motivation to avoid a prosocial request may shift people to internally view their skills in a more realistic, honest light, thereby undoing self-enhancement bias. Indeed, research suggests that self-enhancement is a “light” form of self-deception and can be successfully challenged (see Alicke & Sedikides, 2009). For instance, when asked to engage in an undesirable prosocial task, people might (accurately) attribute instances of prior poor performance to their own skills rather than to outside circumstances. This would suggest that people internalize their new self-views. On the

other hand, people may maintain their enhanced self-views, and simply under-represent their beliefs; thus, their underestimation of their skills just happens to be closer to objective truth than their own self-belief. A third possibility is that participants become biased in the other direction (e.g., attributing all failure to themselves and success to outside circumstances). Future research should examine whether certain motivations (e.g., to avoid prosocial requests) can affect the existence or direction of self-enhancement bias.

A related, but separate, question is whether consumers are attempting to protect their externally projected or their self-perceived moral warmth. We can only conclude here that participants are *at least* protecting their projected moral warmth. However, research implies that people are not only worried about being perceived poorly by others, but that they also wish to avoid negative self-judgment (Lin et al., 2016). Thus, in an attempt to view themselves as morally warm, people may convince themselves internally that they are unqualified for tasks. Other than in Study 1, participants self-reported their skill levels or engaged in behavioral displays of competence anonymously online; thus, participants were at least not simply trying to be polite or avoid an awkward face-to-face encounter. Future research may further address whether people aim to protect their externally projected or internally perceived moral warmth.

Future research may also vary characteristics of the help-seeker. Organizations, brands, and service providers differ in their positioning as competent, socially warm, or morally warm (Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010; Kirmani et al., 2017). This raises the question of whether consumers react differently to requests for help as a function of such positioning. For instance, consumers might believe that adhering to requests from morally warm entities may reflect to a greater extent on their moral character, such that they are more likely to downplay their competence when facing an undesirable request from such entities.

Finally, as many marketers of charitable and other nonprofit organizations seek to encourage consumers to engage in more helping behavior (Garcia, Weaver, Darley, & Spence, 2009; Kulow & Kramer, 2016; Liu & Aaker, 2008; Reed, Kay, Finnel, Aquino, & Levy, 2016), what strategies could be used to mitigate the likelihood that consumers sidestep prosocial requests by downplaying their skills and abilities? Even some for-profit companies (e.g., Amazon) may be interested in such strategies, to the extent that they offer prosocial

incentives for engaging in activities that benefit the company (similar to our Study 3). One possibility is that help-seekers could emphasize that help from consumers of all skills and abilities would be desirable or that the requisite skills are related to moral warmth (e.g., kindness, generosity), which our research shows that consumers are more reluctant to downplay. Help-seekers might also ask consumers to evaluate their skills before revealing that they will be asking for help. Taking this justification away may leave consumers feeling that they cannot refuse the prosocial request without seeming self-interested (Lin, Zlatev, & Miller, 2017). Further, charitable marketing campaigns that use these approaches while also explicitly placing moral warmth at risk may be particularly effective (e.g., “show kindness and empathy. . . we seek individuals with all skill levels to help at our charity event”). Our findings may also be relevant to other prosocial consumption behaviors, such as engaging in sustainable behaviors (e.g., composting, conserving energy, eating less meat). While people may downplay their competence in order to justify avoiding those behaviors, marketers may wish to appeal to their moral warmth and emphasize that the behaviors are not as difficult as perceived.

Conclusion

Although much prior research has pointed to the importance that people place on their competence, we find that in the face of undesirable prosocial requests, people downplay their competence. This lowering of competence only occurs when refusing the request would reflect poorly on moral warmth (i.e., prosocial requests); it does not occur when refusing the request is irrelevant to warmth perceptions (i.e., proself requests). Additionally, when competence, social warmth, and moral warmth are all requisite skills for a prosocial task, people downplay competence and social warmth more than moral warmth. These findings point to consumers’ desire to protect evaluations of their warmth, particularly moral warmth, in the face of undesirable prosocial requests, and further offer contributions to the consumer psychology literature through understanding how consumers avoid prosocial behavior.

Data Collection and Analysis Information

The data for Study 1 were collected at the Palo Alto Caltrain Station by two research assistants

under the supervision of Stephanie Lin in July–August 2015. The data for Studies 2–5 were collected on Amazon Mechanical Turk under the supervision of Peggy Liu in April 2016 (Study 2), July 2017 (Study 3), October 2016 (Study 4), and May 2017 (Study 5). Studies 1, 2, and 5 were analyzed by Stephanie Lin, and Studies 3 and 4 were analyzed by Peggy Liu.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

Appendix S1. Methodological Details.