

# Moral Accounting: How Consumers Spend Guilt-Tainted Money

**Hyun Young Park**  
China Europe International Business School  
**Tom Meyvis**  
New York University

Cite as:

Park Hyun Young, Meyvis Tom (2019), Moral Accounting: How Consumers Spend Guilt-Tainted Money . *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 48th, (10127)

Paper presented at the 48th Annual EMAC Conference, Hamburg, May 24-27, 2019.



# Moral Accounting: How Consumers Spend Guilt-Tainted Money

## **Abstract**

We explore how feeling guilty about money influences consumer spending. We extend mental and emotional accounting to the moral domain and introduce “moral accounting,” in which consumer response to owning guilt-tainted money depends on (1) the moral nature of guilt and (2) the association between guilt and money. Across eight studies, we find that moral guilt (e.g., guilt from lying) attached to money motivates pro-social spending, but decreases self-improvement spending, compared to relatively non-moral guilt (e.g., guilt from failure at dieting). Moreover, compared to moral guilt unrelated to money, moral guilt attached to money increases pro-social spending of that money, more than pro-social spending of other resources (time or untainted money). This medium-specific compensation suggests that consumers feeling guilty about money are motivated to isolate the guilt to money and focus on cleansing that money, instead of incorporating the guilt to the self-view and redeem the self.

**Keywords:** *moral accounting; guilt; money laundering*

**Track:** Consumer Behaviour