

Judging those you cheat: Consumers' reviews following unethical consumption

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Research question

Unethical consumption hurts companies while favorable consumer reviews benefits them.

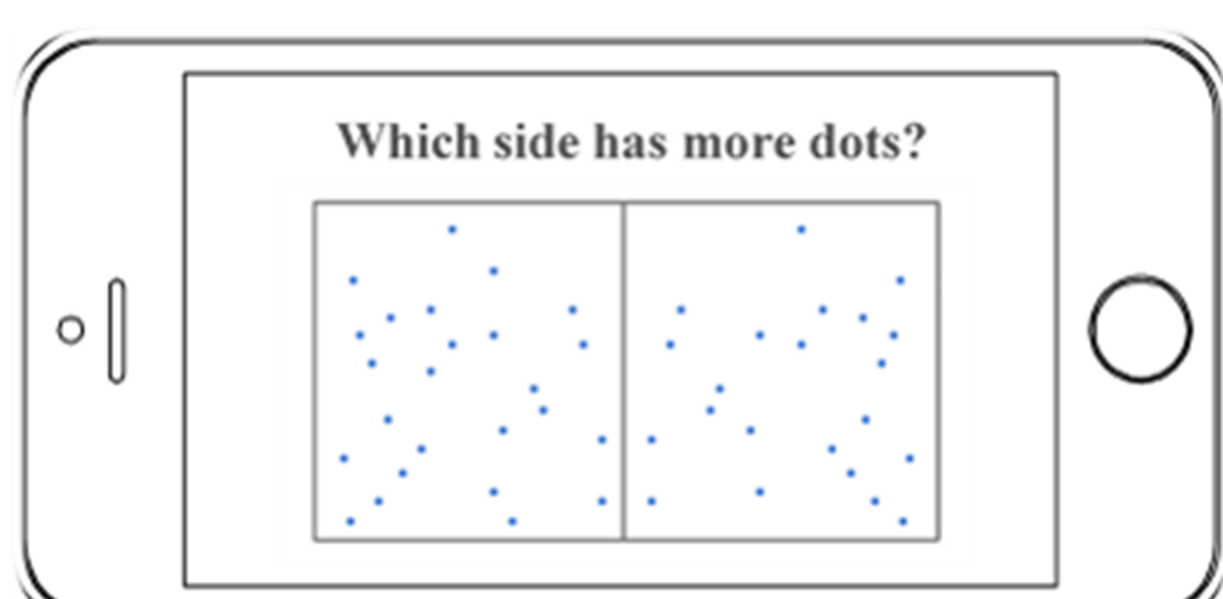
In this research we explore the link between consumers' unethical consumption and their subsequent product reviews. We test two competing predictions:

- 1) Unethical consumers experience guilt that leads them to reparative acts such as positive product reviews (Cohen, Wolf, Panter & Insko, 2011; Xu, Be'gue & Bushman, 2012), vs.
- 2) unethical consumers 'blame' the company for their ethical digression, causing them to further mistreat the company by reporting lower satisfaction levels and less positive reviews (Barkan, Ayal, Gino & Ariely, 2012).

Method

In the guise of a usability study, participants used an app that required them to choose which of two squares (shown for 2 seconds) contained more dots, under two payment conditions:

- 1) Control – get more when choosing the correct side
- 2) Cheating – get more when choosing the right—hand side (even if incorrect)



Then, participants evaluated the app and its features and provided a review:

How would you rate the app in overall?

★★★★★ 4.5

How would you rate the following aspects of the app?

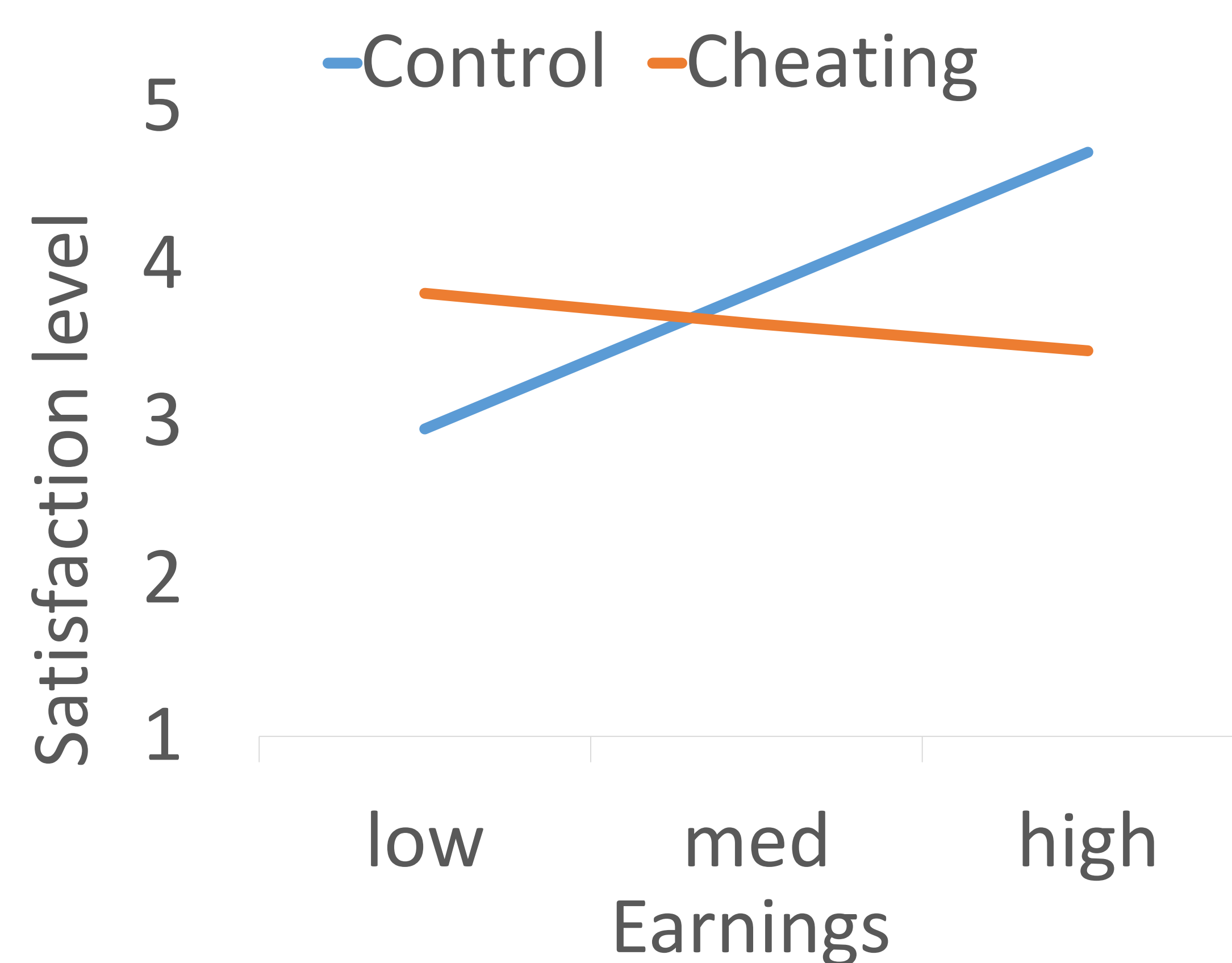
The graphic design ★★★★★ 2.5

The difficulty of the task ★★★★★ 4

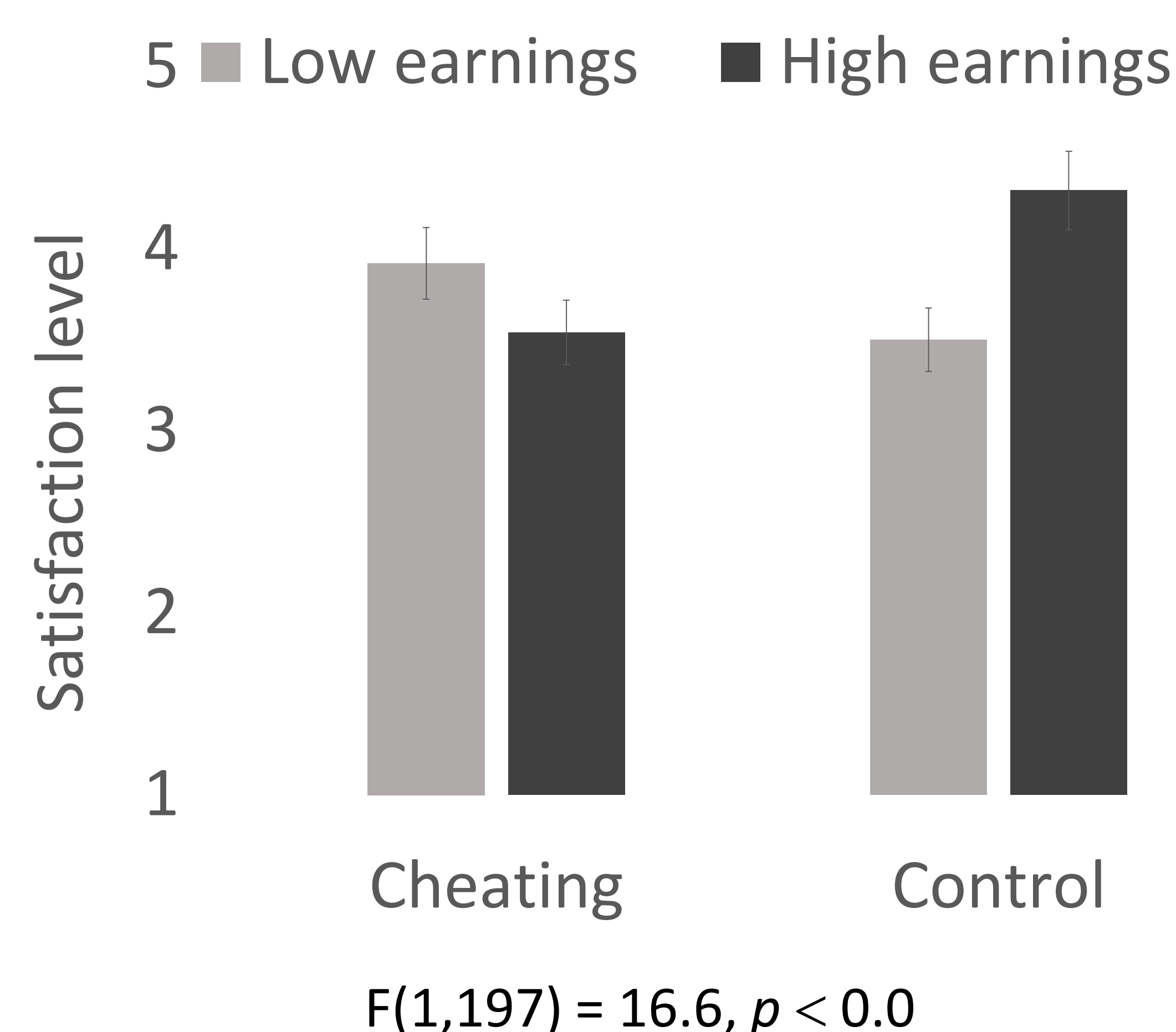
The app's ease of use ★★★★★ 3

Study 1: Higher cheating – lower ratings

N = 201 (65% male, Mean age = 33.4). We find that those that cheat more report lower levels of satisfaction compared to those that cheat less ($B = -.65$, $SE = .18$, $p < .01$).



The effect was positive in the control group ($B = .79$, $SE = .27$, $p < .01$).

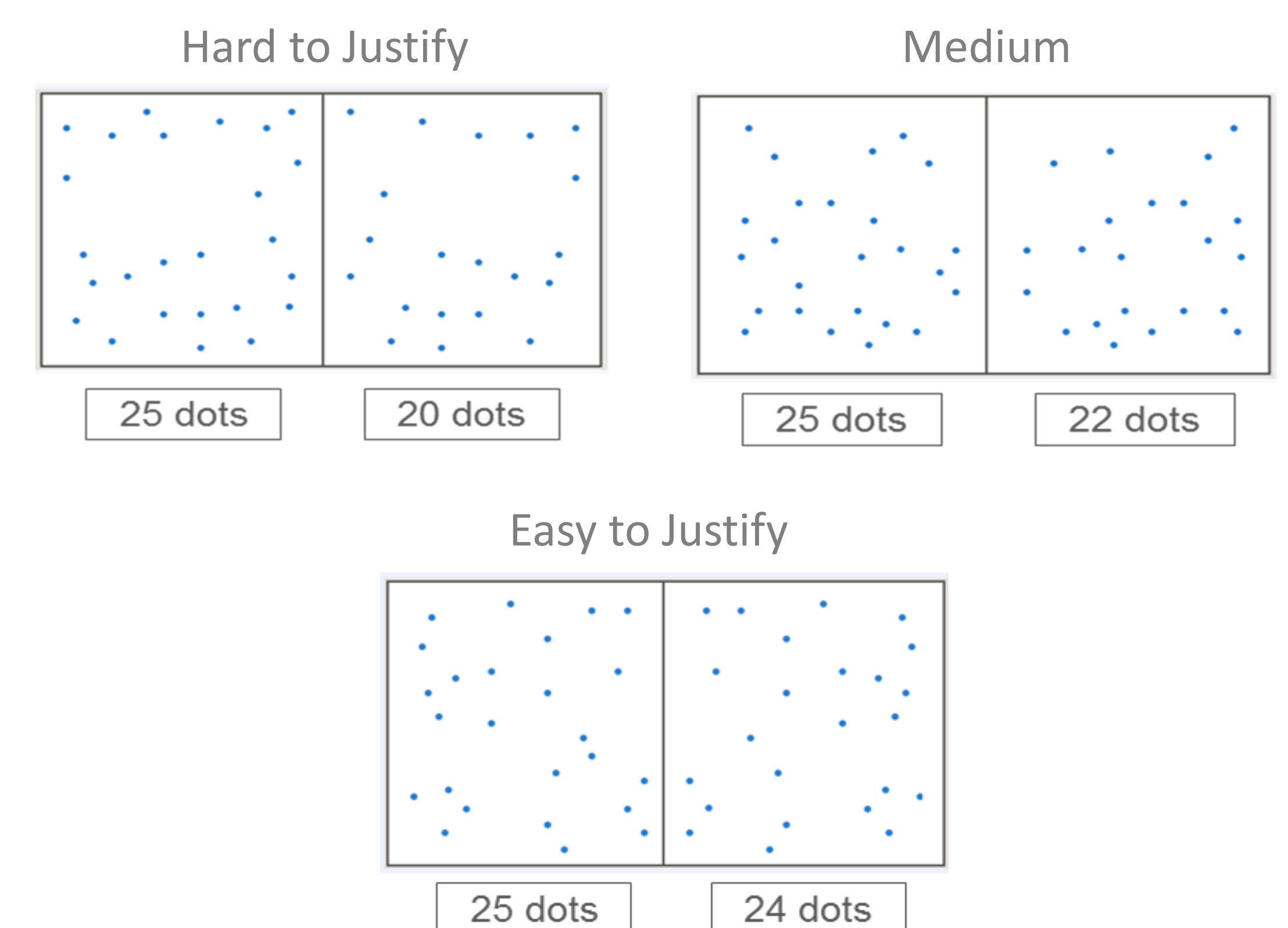


Summary

Overall, cheaters provide lower ratings, but justification moderates the effect. When justification was not hard to make, increased cheating was associated with lower satisfaction level. By contrast, in the hard to justify condition (i.e. easiest task), cheating rate was not associated with satisfaction level.

Study 2: Cheating leads to lower satisfaction only if it is not hard to justify

Three cheating conditions according to the ability to justify it.



N = 462 (72% female, Mean age = 39)



The effect was not significant in the **hard to justify** condition ($B = -.197$, $SE = -.20$, $p = .32$). The effect was significant when justifiability level was **medium** ($B = -.42$, $SE = .16$, $p < .01$) or **easy** ($B = -.60$, $SE = .28$, $p < .05$).

Implications

This research considers unethical behavior as a cause, rather than an effect. In addition, it explores for the first time the relation between consumers' unethical consumption and their eWOM. The research may have implications for marketers, firms and policy makers in terms of marketing strategies, assessment of long-term impact on business results and brand perception.

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