Do We Really Need a Reason to Indulge?

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Decisions to indulge oneself (e.g., purchasing luxuries, going on a cruise) may require legitimate reasons because hedonic indulgences may be construed as wasteful and are likely to evoke guilt. Our study shows that participants expect to experience more negative affect (e.g., guilt) if consuming a hedonic item without a reason than with a reason when asked in a global report fashion (e.g., “How would you feel consuming this item?”). Other participants were asked to report on how they felt during the last consumption episode. Their hedonic enjoyment was unrelated to reasons and justifications. This suggests that a lack of justification does not limit the immediate pleasure of indulging, in contrast to what consumers expect.

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Do We Really Need a Reason to Indulge?
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Extended Abstract

Consumers often need (seek) reasons to justify their decisions or choices (Shafir, Simonson, and Tversky, 1990). More importantly, decisions to indulge oneself (e.g., purchasing luxuries, going on a cruise) may require legitimate reasons because hedonic indulgences may be construed as wasteful and are likely to evoke guilt and (anticipated) regret (Kivetz and Simonson, 2002; Lascu, 1991). As a result, consumers are more likely to choose utilitarian/necessity items over hedonic items because it is easier to justify their purchases (necessities are simply needed as opposed to wanted). But do people actually enjoy more when indulging with a reason than without a reason? Do people enjoy more when indulging with a better reason? The answers depend on how consumers’ hedonic experience is assessed, with important implications for research methods and consumer decision making.

A large body of research has studied the decision inconsistency: i.e., people make decisions that do not seem to maximize their experienced utility and alternative explanations have been offered. One of the account on which this paper is based argues that people may hold incorrect beliefs or naïve theories that are rarely updated about how they will feel in certain consumption situations and that this belief or expectation does not correspond to their actual hedonic experience (Robison and Clore, 2002). According to Robison and Clore’s accessibility model, when people report on their current feelings, the feelings themselves are accessible, allowing for accurate reports. When they report their feelings during a specific past episode, they can often draw on episodic memory, retrieving specific moments and details of the past. In contrast, global reports of past feelings and predictions of future feelings are based on semantic knowledge. In this case, people draw on their general beliefs about the event class to infer what their feelings “must have” been or will be. These different sources of information give rise to systematic differences in people’s self-reports of emotion.

Study one is 2 (reason: yes vs. no) by 2 (reports type: global vs. episodic) between subjects design. We asked half participants to imagine they are consuming a hedonic item either with a reason or without and to report their affective experience in that situation (global report condition). Half participants were directed to recall their most recent hedonic consumption episode and to report their feelings (episodic report condition). They then indicated whether there was a reason associated with that last consumption episode and how much they spent on this indulgence occasion. Our study shows that participants expect to experience more negative affect (e.g., guilt) if consuming a hedonic item without a reason than with a reason when asked in a global report fashion. However, when asked in an episodic condition, their hedonic enjoyment was unrelated to reasons or justifications. This is consistent with Robinson and Clore’s (2002) accessibility model, which suggests that the information that is chronically or temporarily accessible at that point in time drives the differences in emotional reports. Interestingly, we did find that people reported higher spending on indulgence occasions where a reason was present ($M=1277) than those where a reason was not present ($M=928). This provides empirical support for consumers’ willingness to spend more on an indulgence when it is justified for than when it is not justified.

Study two is a 2 (reports type: prediction vs. experience) by 2 (reason: reward vs. consolation) between subjects design. We hypothesize that people expect to enjoy an indulgence more as a result (e.g., passed the exam) than as a consolation (e.g., failed the exam). We predict, however, actual consumption experience would not differ when indulging with different reasons. Participants in one condition (consolation) worked on some difficult GMAT math problems and were told that these problems are indicative of their success at a future GMAT test. We expect participants in this condition to feel bad about their performance and seek indulgence as a consolation. Participants in the other condition (reward) worked on the same math problems but were told that these were very difficult math problems (aimed for math major students) and were asked to give a shot at it. We expect them to feel good about their performance and seek indulgence as a reward. All subjects received feedback (right or wrong) after finishing each individual problem. Participants were then asked to choose between two items, two pieces of chocolate truffles or toothpaste (at equal dollar value) as a token of appreciation for their participation. Participants in prediction condition were asked to imagine that they are consuming the truffles (only those who chose the truffles) and report their affective experiences of eating the truffles. Participants in experience condition actually received their choice. Those who chose to have chocolate truffles were asked to eat as much as they want and report how they feel while eating the truffles. Consistent with previous work (Shafir et al., 1990), participants were as likely to indulge (i.e., choose the truffles) when they think they did well in a test.
(i.e., reward condition) as when they think they didn't do well (i.e., consolation condition). As expected, the predictors in consolation condition expected to enjoy the truffles less than those in reward condition. However, the experiencers' actual enjoyment did not differ systematically between the two conditions. Our findings suggest that a lack of justification does not limit the immediate pleasure of indulging and that a better reason does not make an indulgence more enjoyable, in contrast to what consumers expect.

References:

**Effects of Self-Affirmation and Individualistic-Collectivistic Appeals on Open-mindedness and Advertising Effectiveness**

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

**Background and Scope**
Psychological research has demonstrated how self-affirmation in one domain leads people to be more open-minded and acknowledge the merits of counterattitudinal messages they would otherwise reject. Affirmation-induced openness to counterattitudinal information works because open-minded people are more objective (less biased) and more sensitive to argument strength, and thereby judge an argument on its merits. (Correll, Spencer and Zanna, 2004). Little research has been published within the consumer research or marketing literature about self-affirmation and its effects on consumer cognitions and behavior. It is hypothesized that self-affirmation will result in more open-mindedness and elaboration on information about an advertised product.

**Theoretical Basis:**
Psychological literature suggests close-mindedness stems from an individual's concern for self-regard; in effect, a person resists and rejects conflicting information to protect a sense of self-worth derived from their “right” beliefs and attitudes. Self-Affirmation Theory (Steele, 1988; Steele, Spencer and Lynch, 1993), suggests that every person strives for positive self-regard, and draws on personal successes within a constellation of domains for its achievement. One of its crucial tenets is that the ultimate goal of a defensive reaction is the security of the global sense of self-worth.

Individual differences among consumers in their Need for Cognitive Closure (Kruglanski and Webster, 1996) may differentially affect consumers’ responses; people who have a strong Need for Cognitive Closure often will “seize” and “freeze” without elaborating on the full information available. It is expected that NFCC will moderate the relationship between self-affirmation on open-mindedness and advertising effectiveness.

**Potential Contribution**
This research contributes to extant literature in several ways. First, it expands what little is currently known about how self-affirmation works to influence consumer behavior. Second, it adds to literature focused on information processing in high involvement product categories. Finally, this research contributes to the understanding of the circumstances in which there is an opportunity for more unbiased consideration of products by considering the cognitive processing of the open-minded consumer.

**Research Methodology**
A sequence of experiments has been conducted to test the affects of self-affirmation on consumers’ responses to advertising regarding high involvement products. Respondents were recruited to participate in an experiment about the effects of advertising content on consumer elaboration, cognitions, and intentions. Subjects were randomly assigned to a treatment cell, received a disclosure sheet about the study, and then were asked to view an ad promoting a high involvement product. (The actual headings and phrases in the ad stimuli varied based on cell assignment). Reactions to the advertisement and trait and state measures were then collected.

Study 1 was designed test the impact of positive self-affirmation (ego inflation) on consumers’ responses to advertising. A hypothetical on-line job search portal was selected as the advertised product representing high involvement categories. Study 1 involved the use of a 2 x 2 experiment of the Self-affirmation treatment condition versus a neutral condition by high/low Need for Cognitive Closure. After viewing one ad, subjects first performed an open-ended thought listing. They next rated the advertising as to its effectiveness and were then asked to simulate a job search by rating their interest in a series of job postings. Next they were asked a series of questions about their attitudes and beliefs. Students from undergraduate business classes participated in the research in exchange for class participation credit. A total of 160 respondents completed Study 1.

Study 2 further examined the impact of self-affirmation on advertising effectiveness. A total of 52 undergraduate marketing students received only the affirmation treatment advertisement, and were also asked additional questions related to self-esteem and locus of control...
in addition to the other dependent variables and ratings from Study 1. This phase allowed more in-depth analysis of the relationship between individual differences related to self-esteem and effects of self-affirmation on advertising effectiveness.

Study 3, which is in process now, is designed to examine self-affirmation’s effects on advertising, in conjunction with individualistic/collectivistic appeals. In a 3 x 2 x 2 experiment, consumers will react to advertising that includes self-affirmation by individualistic or collectivistic appeals by high/low Need for Cognitive Closure. A minimum of 30 respondents per cell is planned (240 respondents.) The study is being conducted for hybrid/alternative fuel vehicles as the context for a public service announcement ad. The approach will be identical to that used in Study 1. Medialab software is being used to administer the survey in Study 3, allowing the ad to be presented as a prototype for a 30-second television ad. After viewing one ad, subjects are being asked a series of questions related to their attitudes and beliefs about hybrid/alternative fuel vehicles. Then they will give reactions to the advertising’s effectiveness and asked a series of questions about their general attitudes and beliefs, including an individual difference measure related to individualism/collectivism.

Variables of Study:
The following variables will be included.

- Independent Variables of “Affirmation Condition (positive affirmation, control)” and “Type of Appeal” (Individualistic, Collectivistic) will be tested.
- A Mediating Variable (Openness/Skepticism) will be assessed.
- The Dependent Variable is “Persuasion to Consider the Advertised Product.”
- Moderating Variables are:
  - Individual Differences related to Preference for Individualism/Collectivism
  - Individual Differences on Need for Cognitive Closure (NFCC)

Analysis involved using ANOVA/ANCOVA and special procedures to test for mediation/moderation as outlined in Baron and Kenny (1986).

Hypotheses
The hypothesized relationships among variables are as follows:

H1: Affirmations will lead to more openness.
H2: More openness leads to more elaboration.
H3: More elaboration leads to more persuasion.
H4: “Individualism” will intensify the results: Individualistic appeals will be stronger than collectivistic appeals among “Individualists”, and Collectivistic appeals will be stronger than individualistic appeals among “Collectivists.”
H5: People low in NFCC will respond better to positive affirmations.

Experimental Stimuli
All advertising stimuli were pretested prior to conducting the experiments. The following headlines are being provided as illustrations of the advertising conditions to be tested.

Studies 1 and 2: On-line Job Search Portal
- Self-Affirmation Treatment Condition 1: “Smarter People Find the Best Jobs” (positive self-affirmation treatment condition)
- Neutral Control Condition: “People Find the Best Jobs” (represents non-affirmation condition)

Study 3: Hybrid/Alternative Fuel Vehicles
- Affirmation Treatment Condition/Individualistic Appeal: “You can work hard and do whatever it takes to overcome challenges and to accomplish your goals. You are smart. When faced with difficult and important decisions, you carefully analyze which choice is the right one for your unique situation. You can make more informed decisions. You can act now to make a difference for your future.”
- Affirmation Treatment Condition/Collectivistic Appeal: “We Americans work hard and do whatever it takes to overcome challenges and accomplish our goals. Americans are smart. When faced with difficult and important decisions, we carefully analyze which choice is the right one for our unique situation. We can make more informed decisions. We can act now to make a difference for our future.”
- Control: No affirmation language

References