When and Why Does Guilt Lead to Seeking Negative Experience?
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In this research, we investigate when and why guilt induced by self-responsible goal failures makes consumers seek negative experience. We propose and demonstrate across four experiments that people experiencing guilt would seek negative experience to ensure they would behave more goal-consistently in the future.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Past literature has examined guilt arising from inter-personal settings and found that the feelings of guilt can sometimes lead to a greater tendency to seek negative experience (Bastian et al. 2011; Wallington 1973). For instance, Wallington showed that people who cheated someone else (and presumably felt guilty), imposed a higher intensity of electric shock to himself afterwards (Wallington 1973). The tendency to seek negative experience when feeling guilty has been largely explained as an affect-regulation process, in which people use one kind of negative experience (e.g., physical pain) to get rid of another (e.g., psychological pain).

The current paper, however, offers a forward-looking, goal-regulation perspective to understand how guilt arising from intra-personal settings affects consumers’ hedonic consumption tendencies. Imagine that a person has felt guilty after violating a personal goal (e.g., monetary prudence). Would she be more likely to watch a sad movie than a happy movie afterwards?

Guilt involves a goal failure that is due to one’s own responsibility (Passyn & Sujan 2006). As individuals reflect upon the self-responsibility, they would experience a heightened sense of contingency between their actions and potential outcomes, believing that they would achieve the desired outcomes if they behave appropriately (Duhachek, Agrawal & Han 2012, Thompson, Armstrong & Thomas 1998). Given this heightened sense of contingency, the goal failure would pose a threat to one’s self-view regarding whether one would behave goal-consistently in the future (e.g., being accountable in the matter). We propose that, people experiencing guilt would take actions – in our cases, seek negative experience (i.e., avoiding pleasure and/or seeking pain), to ensure that they would behave more goal-consistently in the future. If this forward-looking, goal-regulation view holds true, we would expect seeking negative experience to be more likely to happen when people experiencing guilt believe that enduring in negative experience can help them to better achieve their goals (Study 1), when they want to persist with the unachieved goals (Study 2), or when they believe their personal qualities is changeable over time (Studies 3 & 4).

Across four experiments, we evoked guilt through recalling a past event in which participants had failed personal goals such as academic achievement (Study 1) or monetary prudence (Studies 2-4). Specifically, in the event recall task, participants recollected a recent past experience where they did not do well in an academic task [spend their money prudently] and they felt responsible for the negative consequence; for the control condition where no guilt was elicited, the goal failure was not due to their fault. Manipulation check confirmed that the two emotion groups differed only in the feelings of guilt (measured by “guilt”, “shame” and “regret”) but not in other general negative emotions (i.e., “sad”, “unhappy” and “distressed”).

Study 1 showed that guilt would lead to a greater tendency to seek negative experience when people believed that negative experience is linked with goal success. After the event recall tasks to induce different emotions, all participants responded to two hypothetical choices: how likely they would accept a free concert ticket from a close friend, and how likely they would forgo a coupon to dine at a 5-star restaurant. The first one was reversely coded and the average of the two served as the dependent variable, with a larger value indicating a greater tendency to seek negative experience. After filler tasks, participants filled up a survey regarding their view about certain behaviors, in which instrumentality beliefs about seeking negative experience (i.e., self-punishment) were measured (3 items, e.g., “People who punish themselves for their failures are more likely to succeed”; a = 0.77). Supporting our proposition, we found participants who felt guilt (vs. mere negative emotions) were more likely to seek negative experience when they were high in instrumentality beliefs (1SD above the mean; 3.77 vs. 3.06; B = 0.71. t (140) = 3.37, p = .001), but not when they were low in instrumentality beliefs (1SD below the mean; 3.08 vs. 3.23; B = -0.15, t (140) = -0.69, p = .493).

If negative experience is indeed sought to ensure future goal-consistent behavior, then participants should be more likely to do so when they want to stay with the goal after its failure. Thus, being persistent in goal pursuit would play a moderating role. In study 2, participants firstly received a sentence unscrambling task to prime goal persistence, followed by the event recall to induce different emotions. Tendency to seek negative experience was assessed by a choice between two articles, with one being more unpleasant than the other (e.g., “A baby who died because of child abuse” vs. “How to take a true relaxing and enjoyable vacation”). As expected, participants experiencing guilt (vs. mere negative emotions) were more likely to choose the unpleasant article to read when they were high in goal persistence (63.0% vs. 30.8%; Wald’s Z = 5.30, p < .05). This tendency to choose the unpleasant article, however, diminished when participants were not primed goal persistence (34.6% vs. 37.0%; Wald’s Z = 0.03, p = .85).

We argued that guilt involves a threatened self-view with regards to whether one would be accountable in the matter and calls for action to ensure goal-consistent behavior in the future. If this is true, individual beliefs regarding whether personal qualities can change will influence people’s tendency to seek negative experience. In studies 3 and 4 we either measured or manipulated such individual beliefs. The tendency to seek negative experience was captured through choice of the unpleasant article (Study 3) or duration of listening to a noise clip (a painful experience based on the pretest; study 4). We found in both studies that guilt lead to a greater tendency to seek negative experience (e.g., choosing the unpleasant article or listening to noise longer) when participants held malleable views about their personal qualities, but not when they held fixed views. Furthermore, the effectiveness of seeking negative experiences was also assessed, and we found seeking negative experience might facilitate the same goal pursuit (e.g., monetary prudence), but not a different goal pursuit (e.g., time prudence).

REFERENCES


