The Limits of Self-Regulation in Behavior, Consumption and Choice
Susan Jung Grant, University of Colorado

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/8844/volumes/v31/NA-31

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
The Limits of Self-Regulation in Behavior, Consumption and Choice

Susan Jung Grant, University of Colorado

Whether a consumer has determined to forgo chocolate, embark on an exercise regime or become master of his destiny, sustained self-control might be considered a key to success. Yet maintaining the strength of will to conquer such challenges is clearly a test that many fail. One explanation for falttering will power is provided by Baumeister and his colleagues (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Muraven, Tice, & Baumeister, 1998; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000; Vohs & Heatherton, 2000; Baumeister & Vohs, 2003). In their model, the psychological resource that sustains the self’s ability to regulate control or effort is conceived of as a resource that is temporarily depleted upon use, and thus, makes extended acts of self-control difficult to sustain. This session was designed to explore how the depletion of self-regulatory resources affects consumption behavior and what the potential consequences may be.

This session sought to extend this theoretical approach in an effort to understand how consumers behave under circumstances in which their self-regulatory resources are experimentally depleted. The three session participants are investigating this question from different angles; the first two papers relate the study of self-regulation to consumption contexts, such as choice and impulsive buying, while the third paper examines the effect that the nature of consumer goals may have on self-regulatory depletion.

The first paper, by Baumeister, discussed the evidence for a model of self-regulation as a resource that is situationally depleted upon use. Baumeister also related research pertaining to the depletion of regulatory resources to the act of choice. The results of two studies suggest that making choices in a consumption context renders the person vulnerable to self-regulation failure in a subsequent context. Moreover, Baumeister put forth the notion that situations calling for extensive choice making, such as in high-involvement purchasing circumstances or when choice is difficult, may incidentally promote self-regulation failure in subsequent, unrelated tasks.

In the second paper, Vohs and Faber investigate how depleted regulatory resources in consumers might account for impulsivity in purchasing contexts. In their research, these authors measure impulsivity by asking respondents about their willingness to pay, by observing their purchase behavior in a mock store with real money, and by measuring impulsivity on a scale. In addition to studying the effects of self-regulation depletion, Vohs and Faber also test interactions of impulsivity as a trait with experimental inductions that require the expenditure of regulatory resources.

The third paper, by Jung Grant and Park, investigates how the framing of goals may provide insight into how regulatory resources are managed. This work suggests that the self-regulatory resource may be a muscle that strengthens with use. Theorizing from Higgins’ self-regulatory goal focus framework (1997) is integrated with Baumeister’s model of self-regulation, suggesting that the limitations on the regulatory resource may be influenced by an individual’s chronic regulatory orientation and the framing of the tasks that individuals attempt. By manipulating the motivational frame (an achievement orientation versus a safety orientation) of tasks respondents are asked to execute within Baumeister’s two-task paradigm, this research suggests self resources develop as a muscle that strengthens with consistent exertion. These findings have implications for the way consumers pursue goals over the long term.

References


EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Self-Regulation, Conscious Choice, and Consumer Decisions”

Roy F. Baumeister

This presentation sought to extend theories of self-regulation to the arena of consumer decisions. First, an outline of the ways in which previous models of self-regulation can be applied to purchasing and consumer research was discussed. Second, the idea that making choices, a behavior that is central to many consumer-related phenomena, is a self-regulatory act was put forth. The act of making choices is shown to relate to self-regulation. The results of two studies suggest that choice making leads to self-regulation failure.

Failures of self-regulation lie at the heart of many of the greatest problems in contemporary society. Overeating, getting too little exercise, alcohol abuse, cigarette use, and marital infidelity, are but a few of the consequences of failing at self-control. (The terms self-regulation and self-control are used interchangeably.) Spending large amounts of money at once, living beyond one’s means, not planning financially for the future, and making poor consumer choices are also problems that are likely linked to self-control.

Although the concept of self-regulation has begun to make its way into consumer thinking, there are currently few existing associations between these two areas. Most notably, Hoch and Loewenstein (1991) wrote about the push-and-pull between desire to have a product and the cognitive efforts to restrain the urge, a conflict at the heart of personal spending. A recent article (Baumeister, 2002) three ways in which consumer research could benefit from self-regulation models.

First, the presence of conflicting goals can easily sidetrack self-regulation efforts. One goal, for example, may be to promote one’s business, which means paying for advertisements, refurbishing the office, or taking clients out to dinner. Conversely, the goal of saving more money for retirement may easily suffer if the goal
of promoting the business is attempted. A second route to self-regulation failure involves keeping track of one’s progress toward the goal. Studies on eating, for instance, demonstrate that overconsumption occurs with ineffective monitoring. Third, a recent model of self-regulation mechanisms (e.g., Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996) posits that the ability to exert self-control is governed by a finite, but global, set of resources. Situational demands calling for self-regulation temporarily deplete this resource, resulting in poor self-regulation. Empirical studies validate this postulate, in showing that engaging in self-regulation on an initial task renders self-regulatory ability on a second task less effective (e.g., Baumeister, Muraven, & Tice, 1998).

Research on the resource model of self-control has expanded to include conscious choice making as a self-regulatory task that depletes the limited supply of regulatory resources. Daily human life is replete with decisions and yet the psychological consequences of decision making are unknown. Decision making itself is related to self-regulation, in that the act of making a choice means to have controlled a given outcome. Additionally, the act of choice making involves several responses that are intertwined with self-regulation: selecting options, drawing relevant comparisons, discarding irrelevant information, making priorities, and ultimately selecting an option to pursue. The act of deciding may have consequences for the rest of the psychological system, in that it may lead to self-control fatigue and later self-control failure. The choices that consumers make may therefore lead to subsequent self-regulation failures.

Two studies tested the idea that choice making leads to self-regulation failure, presumably because it depletes the same resource used in exerting self-control (Vohs, Twenge, Baumeister, Schmeichel, & Tice, 2003). In Study 1, participants in the choice condition were asked to make a series of binary choices between products, such as choosing between a yellow candle and a white candle, and then between a white candle and a purple candle. Participants in the no choice condition reported their opinions on each of eight advertisements. Next, all participants were seated in front of twenty small cups of liquid that had been made with orange drink mix, sugar, water, and vinegar. Participants were offered a nickel for each cup they could drink. Because the drink did not taste good, we surmised that it would take self-control to override the impulse to stop drinking. The results showed that there was a significant difference in the amount of orange drink consumed, with the choice condition participants drinking fewer ounces than the no choice participants.

A second study examined naturalistic choice making and self-regulatory ability. Participants at a shopping mall completed a questionnaire on the extent of their decision making during their excursion. Afterwards, they were asked to complete as many of 72 three-digit by three-digit addition problems (e.g., 349 + 891=?) as they could. Time spent on the math problems was also measured. The results showed that the more choices people reported having made that day, the fewer math problems they solved and the less time they spent completing them.

The results of these studies indicate that choice making is costly to the self, in that it impairs further self-regulatory abilities. Moreover, it suggests that circumstances calling for extensive choice making, such as many purchasing situations, may incidentally promote self-regulation failure. In sum, hypotheses derived from self-regulation models are encouraging avenues for predicting consumer behaviors.

References

“Self-Regulatory Abilities and Impulsive Spending”
Kathleen Vohs and Ronald Faber

In the current research, we tested the hypothesis that weakened self-regulatory abilities promote impulsive spending. This prediction was derived from a model that describes self-control abilities in terms of a limited resource. The results of three studies suggested that self-regulation is a crucial determinant of impulsive spending, such that lower self-regulatory abilities due to a depletion of regulatory resources led to increased impulsive spending tendencies and behavior.

Research on impulsive spending began with the idea that the qualities of products (especially “impulsive” products) were what determined impulsive spending. Later, research shifted to an understanding that impulsiveness comes from within the consumer and not from within the product. Consumers’ internal states, affective experiences, and trait impulsiveness, have been taken into account in recent decades (e.g., Rook & Fisher, 1995). However, these models have fallen short of providing a comprehensive account of impulsive spending, suggesting that crucial aspects are missing from current perspectives.

Controlled outcomes, such as eating, smoking, drug abuse, and consumer behaviors, have two components: the strength of the urge to engage in the behavior and restraints on that urge. Consumer research has done well in accounting for the urge component of impulsive spending, but little has been done to investigate the strength of restraints on the urge. Expanding the scope of research beyond only desire to buy to include self-control variables was the goal of the current research.

A recent model of self-regulation posits that the ability to control desired outcomes, restrain urges, override incipient responses, and manage emotions is governed by a global set of resources. This pool of resources is finite and thus can become momentarily depleted by situational demands (Vohs & Heatherton, 2000). Studies testing this model use a two-task paradigm in which participants complete one task that varies in self-control demands (high versus low/no self-control, typically) and then all participants are tested on a second task that requires self-control. Results of over 12 studies demonstrate that participants who had engaged in self-regulation initially perform worse on the second self-control task, suggesting that some impairment in self-control ability occurred as a result of the first task (see Baumeister & Vohs, 2003).

Three studies tested the hypothesis that self-regulation is a crucial determinant of impulsive spending. In Study 1, participants were shown a video of a woman being interviewed; there was no audio played during the tape and participants were told they would later complete personality ratings of the woman. The tape also
The Limits of Self-Regulation in Behavior, Consumption and Choice

included a series of irrelevant words that appeared on the bottom of the screen. All participants saw the words on the screen; attention-control participants were told to ignore the words and immediately revert their attention back to the woman being interviewed, whereas no attention-control participants were not told any information about the words. Thus, the two groups differed only in their attention-control instructions. Afterwards, participants completed a version of a buying impulsiveness scale (Rook & Fisher, 1995), which was modified to pertain to how participants would respond if they were in a buying situation “right now.” The results showed that participants who engaged in attention control reported that they would be more likely to impulsively buy at that moment, as evidenced by higher scores on the scale. Presumably, participants in the attention control condition expended some of their regulatory resources in controlling their attention during the video and hence were less able to restrain urges to buy.

Study 2 used the same attention control manipulation as in Study 1 and subsequently asked participants to view pictures of 18 high-quality items (e.g., cars, tuxedos, boats) and name the price at which they would be willing to buy each item. Analyses of the proposed prices showed that participants in the attention-control condition would pay more money than the no attention-control participants for the same products.

Study 3 used a behavioral control manipulation and measured actual buying behavior. Regulatory resources were manipulated by having participants read aloud a set of boring historical biographies. Participants in the behavioral-control condition read them aloud under instructions to infuse into their reading as much emotion and body movements as they could; no behavioral-control participants were asked to read the biographies naturally. Afterwards, all participants were told that they would receive $10 and were given the opportunity to buy products from a mock store as part of a marketing study. Participants were told that they could leave with all the money or spend any or all of it to buy products from the mock store. Analyses showed that behavioral-control participants spent more money and bought more products than no behavioral-control participants. Moreover, using scores on the trait version of the buying impulsiveness scale, we found that the increased buying after depletion was found primarily among participants who reported chronically high buying impulsiveness. This state-by-trait interaction suggests that the effects of depletion on restraints to buy are particularly predictive among people for whom the urge to buy is especially strong.

The results of all three studies indicate that when self-regulatory abilities are low, buying impulsiveness is significantly more likely. These studies also lend support to the notion that restraints on the urge to buy are an important component of impulsive buying.

References


“The Effect of Goal Orientation on Self-Regulatory Depletion”

Susan Jung Grant and Jongwon Park

Successful self-regulation involves the exertion of what is commonly called will power in the service of a goal. Though subject to failure, this resource has been conceived of as a muscle (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996; Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Muraven, Tice, & Baumeister, 1998; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). We explore the aptness of this metaphor by examining whether the conceptualization of the goal affects how this self-regulatory muscle is managed.

Higgins and his colleagues have conceptualized a framework of self regulation characterized by two motivational systems, known as promotion and prevention. These orientations describe whether individuals pursue goals to approach a positive outcome (seeking advancement) or goals to avoid a negative outcome (seeking safety). Although people are thought to have an innate chronically accessible goal focus, we manipulate how the goal is construed in order to make a particular goal focus situationally accessible. At this point, there has been little research addressing whether these orientations develop as a muscle would be strengthened with repeated use or whether they are merely different functions that draw on the same regulatory resource. Determining the dimensionality of these orientations is potentially important for understanding how adept individuals may be in switching orientations, and how these two orientations develop within an individual. We believe combining Higgins’ framework with Baumeister’s model of self-regulation may extend understanding of these motivational issues.

Therefore, our research question bridges these two related but separate streams of research to enhance understanding of the structure of self regulation, particularly with regard to the two motivational systems posited by Higgins. Specifically, we examine the effect of exerting self-regulation in one regulatory mode on the exertion of self-regulation in the other regulatory mode (e.g. promotion).

We find preliminary evidence that suggests that when Colorado students (whose chronically accessible orientation is promotion) are asked to perform two consecutive tasks, self-regulation failure occurs when either task conflicts with respondents’ chronic orientation. However, performing consecutive tasks that are framed in terms of promotion does not lead to depletion. In a second study, we find that when Korean students (whose chronically accessible orientation is prevention) are asked to perform two consecutive tasks, self-regulation failure occurs only when both tasks conflict with respondents’ chronic orientation. Respondents who execute a task that is framed in terms of prevention after executing a promotion task (or vice versa) or who execute consecutive prevention tasks show no signs of self-regulation failure. This suggests that self-regulation may be thought of as a muscle that is strengthened by exertion. It is plausible, then, that individuals’ cultural context may develop the self-control resource asymmetrically, depending on whether the culture is more oriented toward achievement (promotion) or safety (prevention).

In these studies, we operationalized self-control in terms of a promotion task (to type as fast as possible in a given amount of time) or a prevention task (to type with as few mistakes as possible in a given amount of time) and measuring performance on a subsequent task that is systematically varied as a promotion task (to solve as many anagrams as possible to win a prize) or a prevention task (to solve as many anagrams as possible to avoid losing a prize).

Finally we propose a third study that would test our findings using consumption-relevant stimuli and dependent measures. The study design calls for examining the effect of framing an initial
consumption task (engaging in product information search) framed in terms of a promotion goal (identifying the product with the most positive features) versus a prevention goal (identifying the product with the fewest negative features) on a second consumption task. (drinking a nutritional beverage) in terms of a promotion goal (to boost health and vitality) versus a prevention goal (to ward off illness and fatigue). We predict that if there are two independent dimensions of self-regulatory resources, the initial task should impair consumption of the second task only when the regulatory focus of the first task matches that of the second task.

Through this work, we hope to extend the self-regulatory model pioneered by Baumeister and his colleagues and to suggest strategies by which people might sustain a long-term focus on a goal. If distinct regulatory resources can be characterized by the goal focus one adopts, one conclusion of this research may be that people could be more effective in carrying out a long-term goal by alternating the framing of the tasks that help one to achieve the ultimate goal.

References