Seize the Day! Encouraging Indulgence For the Hyperopic Consumer

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This paper explores the phenomenon of “hyperopia,” or an aversion to indulgence, as introduced by Kivetz and Simonson (2002) and Kivetz and Keinan (2006). Using an individual-difference measure of hyperopia, three empirical studies demonstrate that hyperopia and high self-control are both conceptually and empirically distinct. Further, we show that altering the level at which an action or item is construed can make an indulgent goal or luxury product more appealing to the high hyperopia consumer by influencing its value in terms of an attractive long-term outcome.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The luxury market in the United States alone generated over $445 billion in 2005 (Mintel 2005). Though some luxury items are associated with frivolity, there also appear to be short and long-term benefits associated with indulgence, beginning with the enjoyment of everyday pleasures and extending to profound effects on life satisfaction (Kivetz and Keinan 2006). However, recent research suggests that consumers may display what has been called “hyperopic” behavior, exhibiting aversion to luxury-related products and actions. Some degree of hyperopia may exist in a broad segment of the population. Therefore, both in order to enhance consumer well-being and provide guidance for luxury marketers, understanding ways in which consumers and marketers can alter such hyperopic tendencies, within reason, is important (Kivetz and Simonson 2002). In the present research, we measure hyperopia as an individual difference, identify mechanisms which drive hyperopic behavior and validate prior assumptions about its nature. We then examine how the level at which goals or purchases are construed can impact the behavior of hyperopic consumers, helping those with high levels of hyperopia to overcome their aversion to indulgence and learn to “Seize the day.”

In the present research, we use a 6-item measure of hyperopia based on the work of Kivetz and Simonson (2002) and examined further by Kivetz and Keinan (2006). This scale captures hyperopia’s main characteristics: First, hyperopia lowers a consumer’s present likelihood of pursuing and consuming indulgences. Second, hyperopic individuals acknowledge their own difficulty with indulgence, and therefore should be capable of reporting these tendencies. Third, the hyperopic tendency to consistently forego indulgence can lead to retrospective regret and a sense of missing out on life (Kivetz and Keinan 2006).

In our first study, we measure individual level hyperopia and examine its relationship to basic outcomes. We propose that consumers high in hyperopia will generally consider a given set of products as more luxurious than will consumers low in hyperopia. Furthermore, we demonstrate that even when controlling for differences in perceived level of luxury, high hyperopia consumers have lower purchase intentions for luxuries than consumers low in hyperopia. Study 1 also provides evidence that high hyperopia is different from excessive self-control, suggesting that hyperopia is distinct from excessive levels of self-control.

Studies 2 and 3 seek to demonstrate a construal based level remedy for hyperopic consumers. In Study 2, we asked participants to adopt and elaborate on an indulgence goal:

Imagine that you have decided that although your financial future is important, you really should enjoy life more by worrying less about how you are spending your money or sticking to a particular budget, and instead focus more on the overall enjoyment of your life.

Immediately following these instructions, the level of construal at which participants were to consider the indulgence goal was manipulated using a laddering technique based on Fujita et al. (2006). For the low-level construal condition, participants were asked to consider how they might pursue the goal. For the high-level construal condition, participants were asked to consider why they might pursue the goal.

We then assessed perceived ease of achieving the indulgence goal. Results showed a significant interaction of hyperopia level and the level at which the goal was construed. Closer examination of this interaction reveals that the effects of construal were primarily among high hyperopia participants. When high hyperopia participants construed the indulgence goal at a higher level, they exhibited a significantly higher sense that they could pursue the goal in question than did those construing at a lower level.

In study 3, we manipulate the construal of an indulgence product through marketing communications. Specifically, participants read about a BMW, either in terms of specific, concrete attributes or higher-level benefits. Then, embedded among a series of distracter questions, we measured their sense that the car constituted a good investment (i.e., that it was consistent with long-term gains) and their purchase likelihood for the car. As in study 2, the ad containing the higher-level construal significantly increased perception of the vehicle as a good investment among high hyperopia consumers. This perception, in turn, mediated an increase in purchase likelihood among that group.

Overall, we reveal that hyperopia operates at a fundamental, perceptual level, creating an upward tendency in the degree to which a given item is seen as luxurious. Furthermore, hyperopic consumers express lower purchase intentions for luxury products, even when controlling for their own luxury perceptions. Studies 2 and 3 reveal that construal level moderates the effect of trait hyperopia. Importantly, we demonstrate that this occurs by altering the extent to which the luxury is seen as a long-term investment or gain, and is, therefore, consistent with the hyperopic consumer’s tendencies. Thus, the present research provides insight into means of overcoming hyperopic tendencies (Kivetz and Simonson 2002).

These theoretical contributions suggest that marketing communications can externally influence construal levels in ways that make luxury products less unappealing to the high hyperopia consumer. Practically, the present research suggests that retailers and consumers can create situations which are conducive to the hyperopic individual’s ability to occasionally “Seize the day!” and make the most out of the opportunities life has to offer.

REFERENCES


