Choosing Your Future: Temporal Distance and the Balance Between Self-Control and Indulgence

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
This project investigates how temporal distance influences consumers' self-control. We find evidence that self-control is dependent on the content of currently active information in decisions for the future. When indulgence information is currently active, decisions for the future tend to be oriented toward self-control. When self-control information is currently active, decisions for the future tend to be oriented toward indulgence. In a series of studies investigating two self-control domains (healthy eating and saving money), we find evidence for an information activation/inhibition account of the influence of temporal distance on self-control decisions.

Temporal distance has a wide array of implications (see Trope, Liberman, and Waksslash 2007). According to construal level theory (Trope and Liberman 2003), the greater the temporal distance the more likely it is that events will be represented in abstract terms (high-level construal) as opposed to concrete terms (low-level construal). Thinking about eating right now may be represented as preparing the food and eating it, while thinking about eating a year from now may be represented as trying to feel good and be healthy. According to time discounting theories (Frederick, Loewenstein, and O’Donoghue 2002 for a review), the greater the temporal distance to an outcome the smaller the perceived value of this outcome. A tasty, rewarding meal may not be perceived to be so rewarding if it will happen in the distant future. This paper proposes an additional way in which temporal distance can influence preferences in decisions requiring self-control. Based on research on the role of activation and inhibition processes in the representation of knowledge structures (Kruglanski et al. 2002), we propose that an increase in temporal distance may lead to inhibition of currently active information. Inhibition of currently active information may result in activation of competing information, which will in turn influence the value of objects. Therefore, when information about indulgence (regulation) is currently activated, people will make indulgent (regulatory) choices for the present, but regulatory (indulgent) choices for the future.

In study 1, we used a scrambled sentence task to prime information about indulgence, self-control, and neutral. Then, we asked participants to choose a snack for their participation in the study. They either chose a snack that they would receive at the end of the experimental session or at the end of the semester for their participation in the semester studies, manipulated between-subjects. A binary logistic regression indicated an interaction between the information prime and time frame factors (Wald $\chi^2(2)=18.83, p<.01$). In the indulgence information prime condition, participants were less likely to choose a healthy snack in the present time frame (22.8%) than in the future time frame condition (62.5%), ($\chi^2(1)=13.84, p<.01$). In the self-control information prime condition, participants were more likely to choose a healthy snack in the present time frame (58.9%) than in the future time frame condition (30.0%), ($\chi^2(1)=6.54, p=.01$). In the neutral information prime condition, participants were as likely to choose a healthy snack in the present time frame (50.0%) as they were in the future time frame condition (48.8%), ($\chi^2<1$).

In study 2, the same procedure was used with the exception that we measured implicit goal accessibility (i.e., latency of word recognition) after participants thought about snacks they would like to get in the present vs. in the future. A positive score indicates activation of the self-control concept (i.e., faster reaction times for self-control-related words than for neutral words), while a negative score indicates inhibition of the self-control concept (i.e., slower reaction times for self-control-related words than for neutral words). There was again an interaction ($F(1, 209)=17.12, p<.01$). In the indulgence information prime condition, participants showed inhibition of the self-control concept in the present time frame condition ($M_{Present}=-75$ ms), but activation of the self-control concept in the future time frame condition ($M_{Future}=80$ ms; $F(1, 209)=9.22, p<.01$). In the self-control information prime condition, participants showed activation of the self-control concept in the present time frame condition ($M_{Present}=59$ ms), but inhibition of the self-control concept in the future time frame condition ($M_{Future}=-73$ ms; $F(1, 209)=7.90, p<.01$).

Study 3 asked participants how much money they were interested in donating to some local charities after information about saving or spending money was primed. We told participants that they could either spend money on shopping or save their money and donate it to charity (the more money they were willing to donate to charity, the more money they were willing to save). There was again an interaction ($F(2, 247)=4.44, p<.05$). There was an effect of time frame in the saving money information prime condition. Participants were willing to donate more money in the present than in the future ($M_{Present}=81.98, M_{Future}=-4.44, p<.05$). There was not an effect of time frame in the neutral information prime condition. Participants were willing to donate the same amount of money in the present and in the future ($M_{Present}=63.50, M_{Future}=60.75, F<1$).

These results show that the content of currently active information can influence the construal of a situation in decisions for the future. In decisions involving a conflict between indulgence and regulation, information that is currently active tends to be inhibited as temporal distance increases. As a consequence of inhibition, this information content decreases in importance for the decision in hand. Marketers may be able to use the operations of these processes to their advantage. A retailer may use the store environment to make information about saving money currently active, but then motivate people to make purchases for a certain occasion (e.g., anniversary, child’s birthday) in advance. A store environment that has information about saving money may attract more customers, but these customers may end up spending a lot of money rather than saving money when making purchases for the distant future.

REFERENCES