Counteractive Construal in Consumer Goal Pursuit

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The present research explores a self-control operation, namely counteractive construal, that helps consumers resolve the conflicts between an important goal and a short-term temptation by altering the construal of the temptation. We propose that when experiencing a self-control conflict, consumers intentionally construe temptation as more damaging to the attainment of a long-term goal, and use these distorted construals to help resolve the conflict in favor of the goals. Four studies in two self-regulatory domains (dieting goal and academic goal) provided converging evidence for the counteractive construal hypothesis. We found that people who were experiencing self-control conflict expected tempting food items to contain more calories, or expected parties to take more time away from studying, and were consequently less interested in consuming these temptations.

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candidates to help us test our theorizing. We predict that for judgments shared a physiological base (i.e., "heavy" and "stress"), the effects are more likely to be reciprocal, however, for the condition when one judgment is physiological (i.e., "heavy"), but the other is an abstract concept (i.e., "important"), the effects are more likely to be uni-directional (from "heavy" to "importance"). This is because that prior research has found that it is relatively earlier for a physical experience to have effects on an associated abstract concept than the other way around (Boroditsky 2000).

Two experiments were conducted to test our predictions. Experiment 1 provided the first investigation of our hypotheses whereas experiment 2 (on going) further examined the underlying mechanism. Two hundred and fifty-two participants participated in experiment 1. It had a 4 (Prime: Heavy, Stress, Importance, Control, between subjects) x 3 (Target: Heavy judgment, Stress judgment and Importance judgment, within subjects) mixed design. Upon arrival, participants were told to take part in two unrelated tasks. For the first task, participants in the heavy perception condition were asked to carry a shopping bag with three bottles of water (1.8L each). In the stress condition, participants were asked to recall and briefly describe an event that they felt very stressed, whereas in the importance condition, participants were asked to recall a very important decision they made. In the control condition, participants only completed the second task.

After the first task, participants were given a questionnaire set composed of three tasks: weight estimation, stress levels and important rating (the order was counterbalanced). In weight estimation task, participants estimated the weight of a package (2-item: on a 9-point scale and actual weight estimation in grams). For task related to stress judgment, they were asked to indicate how stressful thinking about class presentation made them feel (on a 9-point scale; 3-item: not at all/very stressful, worried, pressured). For importance judgment, participants needed to rate the importance of a new course on general education (on a 9-point scale: 3-item: not at all/very important, critical, crucial)

The items on stress (α=.87) and importance (α=.91) were averaged. ANOVAs for repeated measures were performed using the averaged ratings on stress and on importance, and subjective weight judgments as dependent variables. The results supported our hypotheses. Data revealed a main effect of judgment types, qualified by the two-way interaction (ps < .001). A closer examination of data showed that carrying a heavy bag, as compared to control condition, had an effect on all judgments in the second questionnaire: participants reported a higher weight estimation (M=6.11; 1134.92 g; Mcontrol=5.30; 603.49g), felt more stressful towards an event (M=6.70; Mcontrol=6.13) and rated a new subject more important (M=6.05; Mcontrol=5.67; p<.001). Recalling a stressful event, as compared to control, had significant effects on weight judgment (M=6.05; Mcontrol=5.30; 603.49) and stress feelings (M=6.82; Mcontrol=6.13; p<.001), but not on importance (M=5.20; Mcontrol=5.13; p>.1). Finally, importance prime only had effects within the same domain of importance rating (M=5.84; Mcontrol=5.12, p<.01), but no effects on the other two domains (weight judgment: M=5.37; 621g; Mcontrol=5.30; 603g; Stress feeling: M=6.42; Mcontrol=6.12, p>.1). In other words, these results showed that (1) all the concepts had significant influences within their own domain, consistent with the predictions of priming literature; (2) as we expected, physical sense of carrying heavy objects led people to feel more stressful, and regarded a subject as more important; (c) The link between "heavy" and "stress" were reciprocal, whereas between "heavy" and "importance" was more uni-directional.

In the second experiment (on going), we examined the underlying mechanisms of the asymmetric findings further. If, as we argue, the bi-directional effects depend on whether a physiological state is shared between two domains, then inducing participants with a "physical focus" vs. "thinking focus" should moderate the effects. Specifically, instructing participants to focus on their "physical experience" when doing the task should strengthen the effects between heavy and stress in both directions; however, instructing participants to focus on their "thoughts" should strengthen the effects of "heavy" on "importance". No other effects were predicted. Our on-going experiment 2 had provided some initial support to these predictions.

References

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14They might also share some semantic links.
15A pilot test shows that participants would regard this bag as heavy.
distorted construals to help resolve the conflict in favor of the goals. Four studies in two self-regulatory domains (dieting goal and academic goal) provided converging evidence for the counteractive construal hypothesis. We found that people who were experiencing self-control conflict expected tempting food items to contain more calories, or expected parties to take more time away from studying, and were consequently less interested in consuming these temptations.

Consumers often face temptations in the pursuit of important long-term goals. Because the pursuit of such temptations potentially undermines the attainment of the goal, the presence of both the goal and temptation constitutes a self-control dilemma, which requires individuals to engage in self-control effort in order to maintain their goal pursuit (Aspinwall and Taylor 1997; Fishbach, Friedman, and Kruglanski 2003; Trope and Fishbach 2000). In this research, we propose a self-control mechanism, namely counteractive construal, that consumers employ to help them resist the temptation. Specifically, we propose that whenever consumers experience a conflict between a long-term goal and a short-term temptation, they augment the extent to which the temptation may undermine the goal attainment, thus are more likely to resist the temptation and resolve the self-control conflict in favor of the long-term goal.

Despite consumers’ wish to perceive the world in an accurate and objective way, prior research has demonstrated that individuals’ motivational states have a profound influence in shaping their perceptions and judgments (Baumeister and Newman 1994; Kunda 1990). Because one’s perceptions and judgments are heavily influenced by their motivational states, it is possible that one’s motivation to maintain their goal pursuit would potentially alter the construal and assessment of the options in this conflict (Fishbach, Shah, and Kruglanski 2004). In other words, one may help resolve the self-control conflict by augmenting the perceived cost of pursuing the temptation, such that it poses a greater threat to the attainment of the more important goal and would therefore be avoided.

Since we conceptualize counteractive construal as a self-control response designed to help individuals maintain their goal pursuit when facing a dilemma, we expect it to occur only when consumers experience the conflict between a long-term goal and a short-term temptation. The strength of the counteractive operation, accordingly, should depend on the intensity of the conflict: when the conflict is minimal, such as when the goal is unimportant, or the temptation is inaccessible, counteractive construal is unlikely to occur. Based on prior findings in the substitutability between self-control and external control, we further hypothesize that whenever there are externally imposed controls, counteractive construal becomes unnecessary because the external controls would be sufficient to ensure that the long-term goal would not be undermined by the temptation (Kruglanski et al. 2002; Tesser, Martin, and Cornell 1996). Because of the instrumental nature of counteractive construal, we further expect that it should only occur when self-control is effective in helping avoid the temptations. In situations where self-control is of no value in fending off the temptation, we expect no counteractive alterations in the construal of the temptation.

Three studies tested the present predictions. Across all studies, consumers faced a dilemma between succumbing to an immediately gratifying temptation and maintaining their goal pursuit, and we measured their perceptions of the tempting targets to test the counteractive construal hypothesis.

Study 1 and 2 tested whether consumers with (vs. without) an accessible dieting goal would construe tempting food items (cookies and drinks) to contain more calories, depending on whether they expected to have an opportunity to consume the tempting items or not. In study 1, we used a goal strength x temptation availability (available vs. unavailable) two factor design, where the temptation availability was manipulated as a between-subject factor and the strength of the dieting goal was measured as an individual difference factor. The dependent variable was the estimated calorie content in a piece of chocolate-chip cookie. We found that for participants who were told that they would have an option to take one cookie at the end of the study, the strength of their dieting goal positively predicted the amount of calories they perceived the cookie to contain. In contrast, for those who were not offered the option to take a cookie, there was no such relation.

Study 2 directly manipulated the accessibility of the dieting goal for participants and tested their construal of a tempting drink depending on whether they anticipated to have the option to consume the drink or not. We employed a 2 (dieting goal prime: yes vs. no) x 2 (temptation availability: available vs. unavailable) between-subject design. We manipulated the accessibility of participants’ dieting goal by changing the settings of the small experiment room with three large posters depicting fit females or natural sceneries. The dependent variable was the estimated calorie content in a cup of sweetened soda. The results confirmed our hypothesis. For participants whose dieting goal was made accessible, they construed the soda to contain more calories when they expected it to be available for consumption than when they did not expect it to be available. However, when participants’ dieting goal was not made accessible, the perceived amount of calories in the soda did not differ between those who expected to have an option to consume and those who did not.

Study 3 tested the hypothesis in a different context and included another dependent variable: participants’ behavior intentions toward the temptation. We asked undergraduate participants to estimate the duration of a party when shown a flyer that invited them to a party either before or after they reported their desired GPA. We predicted that students who read the party invitation after reporting their desired GPA, in comparison to those who read the flyer before reporting their desired GPA, would experience a self-control conflict and expect the party to be longer, and in turn show lower interest in attending the party. The results showed the predicted goal strength x self-control conflict interaction. When participants viewed the party flyer after answering the school-related questions, their desired GPA positively predicted the anticipated duration of the party. Such relation was not found among participants who viewed the party flyer before answering school related questions. In addition, for participants who experienced the self-control conflict between the academic goal and the tempting party, the estimated duration negatively predicted their intention to attend the party, whereas there was no such relation among participants who did not experience the self-control conflict.

In order to accomplish important long-term goals, consumers need to resist temptations, which are immediately gratifying yet costly to the goal attainment. The present research documented counteractive construal as a self-control mechanism that helps people resolve the conflict between a short-term temptation and a long-term goal. By perceptually increasing the cost of pursuing the temptation when experiencing such dilemma, consumers become more likely to avoid the temptation and maintain their goal pursuit.

References


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**Fashion Systems and Historical Culture in the Development of Chinese Global Branding**

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Global market trends move toward increasing global cultural convergence and, at the same time, a need for local cultural differentiation. To address these contradictory forces, the research investigates processes and practices of marketers and consumers in three related cases: Jay Chou (a well-known Chinese music artist); the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony; and Shanghai Tang (a global fashion brand). The studies reveal strategic processes and mechanisms involved in the creation of a series of texts and codes from Chinese cultural resources. The theoretical and practical significance of studying historical culture, fashion systems and integrating current branding theories in a more holistic manner contributes a new approach to apparent contradictions that clearly must be dealt with simultaneously.

**Methodology: multi-sited ethnography studies and ECM Data collection**

Multi-sited ethnography is suited for interdisciplinary cultural studies on global and local areas and expresses the diffusion and circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in different time and space (Marcus 1998). Interviewing global consumers and marketers in different locations and observing consumption environments and consumers’ consumption behaviours, as well as websites and other media resources, reveal the possibility and process of understanding, and engaging, Chinese global branding strategy. An extended case method, a mode of “logical analysis on the data interpretation of field observation, interviews, primary source materials, archived texts” (Holt 2002, p. 73), is employed to illuminate recent global brand culture initiatives from China.

**Historical Culture in Branding**

From a cultural branding perspective, retro activities and aesthetic fashions, including reproduction (Pearman 1999), retro-serving (Alexander 1999), retro-styling (Brown 1999), retro retail stores (Maclaran and Stevens 1998), and heritage marketing hybrids, recognize the past’s use in brand development. In other words, historical culture is employed to develop brands. Indeed, the presentation of historical culture, or the past, in marketing has been investigated for several decades. Some researchers contend that the prevalence of retroactivities is motivated by consumers’ nostalgic desire (e.g. Lowenthal 1985; Belk 1991; Borgerson and Schroeder 2003; Holak and Havlena 1992; Stern 1992; Holbrook 1993; Holbrook and Schindler 1996, 2003).

Others claim that marketing the past is a way of secularizing the sacred historical, cultural, and religious elements and beliefs to enhance marketing activities (e.g. Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; O’Guinn and Belk 1989). As Eckhardt and Bengtsson suggest in the Chinese case, it may be valuable to engage the past as a strategic brand-signifying practice (2007). Moreover, they demonstrate Chinese branding’s emergence in imperial China, marking a long history of attention to these processes.

**Brand Development Culture and Fashion Systems**

Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling discuss the roles that history and culture play in understanding the cultural codes of branding, expanding recognition of research that taps into what they call brand culture (2006). They write, “If brands exist as cultural, ideological, and political objects, then brand researchers require tools developed to understand culture, politics, and ideology…” (2006, p. 1). Thus, we understand the importance of social, cultural, and historical resources in undertaking branding, marketing, and consumer research.

For purposes of this research, a fashion transformation process model (Cholachatpinyo et al., 2002) allows us to recognize fashion as a system that influences global brand development, engaging fashion branding processes from macro-subjective (economic values/assumptions that legitimize particular activity); macro-objective (marketplace and economic activities); micro-objective (interaction between individual and variety of fashion objects); and micro-subjective perspectives (psychological phenomena of individual and of the interaction among individuals).