Pride: a License to Indulge Or a Cue For Greater Self-Control?

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Emotions play an important role in the pursuit of goals. Because the existing research on emotions has focused primarily on the effect of happiness (versus sadness) on indulgent consumption, we still know little about how other positive emotions, such as pride, affect behavior. This paper examines how the experience of pride affects the pursuit of long-term goals. In two studies, we demonstrate that pride serves as a source of information that licenses indulgence. When individuals are unable to monitoring their behavior or the experience of pride is discredited, however, pride reduces preference for indulgent alternatives by cuing the pursuit of long-term goals.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Consumers frequently face choices in which personal goals of long-term importance conflict with indulgent pursuits that are inconsistent with their long-term objectives. When faced with such decisions, most consumers try to exercise self-control, but they often fail and make indulgent choices that undermine their long-term goals. Recent research has linked emotions to indulgence. However, much of this research has focused on the effect of incidental happiness (versus sadness) on consumption (Garg et al. 2007). Thus, we know very little about how other incidental positive emotions, such as pride, affect consumers' long-term goal pursuit and their preference for indulgent options that undermine such goals.

When consumers face indulgent decisions, self-regulatory processes facilitate their ability to act in accordance with their long-term goals (Baumeister 2002). A central component of successful self-regulation is that the person must have the capacity to monitor her behavior to ensure that it is consistent with her goal. Carver and Scheier (1998) propose that when people are consciously monitoring their behavior relative to a goal, negative emotions signal goal failure, which leads them to try harder to reach their goal. Positive emotions, however, signal goal attainment, which licenses them to reduce subsequent effort in the domain.

Interestingly, this suggests that positive emotions may reduce a person’s effort toward a long-term goal, which, in turn, should increase his or her preference for indulgent options that undermine such goals. Yet, this appears counter to what we already know about the motivational properties of emotions since happiness has been shown to reduce indulgent behavior compared to sadness (Garg et al. 2007). We suggest, however, that because pride is experienced in response to the successful pursuit of long-term goals, upon experiencing pride, consumers are likely to infer that they have achieved or have made satisfactory progress toward a long-term goal. Consequently, when consumers face an indulgent choice and they begin to monitor their behavior relative to a long-term goal, they should misattribute the experience of pride as having temporarily satisfied the goal, which, in turn, should license indulgence.

Recent evidence suggests that specific emotions may also influence goal pursuit beyond that of the information providing during the monitoring process. When individuals experience an emotion or are primed with an emotion, it activates cognitions and action tendencies that are linked to that emotion in memory (Lang et al. 1998). These concepts can lead individuals to perform emotion appropriate behavior (Zemack-Rugar et al. 2006). Because pride is experienced in response to the achievement of long-term goals, it is linked in memory to cognitions associated with the successful pursuit of long-term goals (Eyal and Fishbach 2009). Thus, the experience of pride should activate these concepts, which, in turn, should serve as salient cues to guide behavior. Consequently, pride may decrease consumers’ preference for indulgent options by serving as a behavioral cue through an automatic process.

In sum, we argue that the experience of pride influences consumers’ pursuit of long-term goals through dual pathways that predict different outcomes in terms of their preference for indulgent products. When consumers are consciously monitoring their behavior, pride serves as a source of information that licenses indulgence. Otherwise, the experience of pride will decrease consumers’ preference for indulgent products through an automatic process by cueing behaviors consistent with the successful pursuit of long-term goals. We demonstrate the dual pathways in two studies. First, we show that pride licenses indulgence, unless a) individuals are unable to monitor their behavior or b) the experience of pride is discredited as a source of information. Second, we demonstrate that another positive emotion (i.e., happiness) does not have a similar influence on behavior.

In study 1, we presented respondents with an indulgent decision in the health domain that involved a choice between french fries or salad as a side dish with their lunch entrée. Prior to making their decision, respondents were primed to experience pride, happiness or no emotion (control group). The extent to which individuals were able to monitor their behavior was manipulated using a cognitive load manipulation. Consistent with our prediction, when respondents were able to monitor their behavior (high cognitive load), those that were primed with pride were more likely to make an indulgent choice compared to the control group. When individuals were unable to monitor their behavior (low cognitive load), those that were primed with pride were less likely to make and indulgent choice compared to the control group. Additionally, no difference was observed between the happiness and control conditions at high and low levels of cognitive load.

In the second study, respondents were given an indulgence decision in the money domain that involved a choice between two $25 gift certificates where one could be used for entertainment products (indulgent option) and the other could be used for school supplies. Prior to making their decision, respondents were primed to experience pride or no emotion (control group). For half of the respondents, the experience of pride was discredited by having them focus on the source of their feelings prior to making their decision. As expected, when the source of their feeling was not discredited, respondents that experienced pride were more likely to make an indulgent choice compared to the control group. However, when the experience of pride was discredited, respondents were less likely to make an indulgent choice compared to the control group. Thus, the results of the second study demonstrate the dual pathways even where individuals have the capacity to monitor their behavior.

This research makes an important contribution to the literature on the motivational properties of emotions by a) identifying the process through which pride affects goal pursuit and b) demonstrating the effect of its experience on consumer preference. Our findings also contribute to the decision-making literature, which has focused primarily on discrete negative emotions (Raghunathan, Pham and Corfman 2006), by demonstrating that distinct positive emotions (pride versus happiness) can have unique effects on consumer choice.

REFERENCES


