Reinforcing “Shoulds”: the Effect of Mindsets on Sequential Choices

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Research has observed two distinct patterns in sequential choices: reinforcement and balancing. We propose that reinforcement or balancing in sequential decisions depends on the mindset of the consumer. We demonstrate that seemingly different choices (exercising and working) appear more related when interpreted at a higher level (both being relative virtues or shoulds) and that higher level processing facilitates reinforcement across decisions which appear related. Accordingly, we find that an initial should choice begets subsequent unrelated should choices under an abstract mindset, as compared to a concrete mindset. We believe this research has important implications for accomplishing self-improvement goals.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Wanting Versus Choosing: A Disconnect between What Moves Us and What We Prefer”
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A growing body of research finds that decisions that we make when considering multiple options yield different preferences than those that we make when considering one option at a time (e.g., Hsee et al. 1999). For example, when considering options one at a time, people prefer options with high relative payoffs to themselves versus an opponent, but when considering multiple options at once, people prefer options with high absolute payoffs to themselves, and relative payoffs become less important (Bazerman et al. 1992).

This preference reversal between separate versus joint evaluation (considering one option at a time versus considering multiple options at a time) prompts a question about how decisions made about motivation, which are typically made in separate evaluation (Will I do a task for Incentive X?), and decisions made about preference, which are typically made in joint evaluation (Do I prefer Incentive X or Incentive Y?), may differ. The current paper seeks to investigate the motivational consequences of joint versus separate preference patterns, and in the process, contribute insights that inform the design of effective incentive and promotion schemes.

Drawing on prior research by Bazerman and colleagues (e.g., Bazerman et al. 1998; 1999), we predicted a discrepancy between rewards that people choose and rewards that most strongly motivate people to act. Across three experiments, when incentives were offered individually, hedonically appealing want incentives like lotteries and chocolate were equally or more motivating than practical should incentives like sure cash payments. In choices between incentives, however, should options were more popular.

In Experiments 1 and 2, in exchange for completing a survey, participants were offered an emotionally evocative want incentive (Experiment 1: a Toblerone candy bar, Experiment 2: a Lottery), a practical should incentive (both experiments: a sure $3 payment), or a choice between the two incentives. When incentives were offered individually in Experiment 1, participants were equally motivated by want and should incentives; however, when participants decided directly between the two options, they chose the should incentive ($3) significantly more often. Experiment 2 produced a full preference reversal in which participants were more motivated by the want incentive (a lottery) when the incentives were offered individually, but chose the should incentive (a sure $3) more often when asked to choose between the two options.

Experiment 3 tested whether an opportunity for comparison was sufficient to make decisions made in separate evaluation to resemble those made using joint evaluation. In a new condition, participants were offered only one incentive in exchange for effort (the Toblerone bar or the sure $3), but they were informed that the other incentive existed. Consistent with the idea that comparison of multiple options triggers a preference for more practical alternatives, participants in the new condition who had an opportunity to compare were more motivated by the should incentive (the sure $3) than by the want incentive (the Toblerone bar). These results suggest that, the pattern of preference for should incentives in matters of choice and want incentives in matters of motivation is primarily due to the structure of the decision task (in joint versus separate evaluation) instead of due to a fundamental difference in the types of incentives that are preferred in motivation versus choice contexts. When participants could compare options as in joint evaluation, preferences in separate evaluation (motivation) contexts resembled those in the joint evaluation (choice) contexts. In fact, simply mentioning the existence of a should incentive was sufficient to change decisions about motivation (made in separate evaluation) to emulate decisions made in joint evaluation.

The findings question a common belief among both behavioral researchers and practicing marketers that individuals’ choices among options signal what motivates them or makes them happy. The common practice of asking focus group members to pick between promotional items may not reveal which incentive will be successful in motivating people. Although people may strongly prefer one item over another when both items are presented side-by-side, the favored item may flop as a motivational tool. In sum, this work adds new information about a discrepancy between choice and motivation to a host of research on preference reversals (Grether and Plott 1979; Lichtenstein and Slovic 1973; Slovic and Lichtenstein 1968), all of which underscores the necessity to carefully match the mode of an inquiry to the context in which the results will be applied.

References
Imagine a consumer who is going through his day making a series of choices. Earlier in the day he decides to go to the gym and exercise. Later, as he is walking out of the gym, he is approached by a representative from a local charity with a request for donation. Would choosing to exercise make him more or less likely to donate? Recent research has observed two distinct patterns in sequential choices: reinforcement and balancing (Dhar et al. 2007; Dhar and Simonson 1999; Huber et al. 2007; Khan and Dhar 2006). Reinforcement occurs when an initial choice strengthens commitment to the related goal, leading to a similar subsequent choice. Conversely, balancing occurs when an initial choice satisfies and hence inhibits the related goal, allowing for the pursuit of an alternate goal on a subsequent choice. The present research proposes that reinforcement or balancing in sequential decisions can depend on how the choices are interpreted. Specifically, we posit that an initial choice will lead to reinforcement when the choices are interpreted at a higher level of abstraction. On the other hand, when choices are interpreted more concretely, an initial choice leads to balancing in subsequent decisions. We build on the notion that seemingly different choices (e.g., exercising and charitable giving) may be viewed as more related when interpreted at a higher level, as both indicate relative virtues (or shoulds as opposed to wants, Bazerman et al. 1998). Since choices interpreted at a higher level are also more likely to be seen in terms of their relationship to higher order goals that define one’s self-concept (Trope and Liberman 2003), inconsistent choices would have the negative effect of highlighting a conflicting self image; thus we expect higher level processing to facilitate reinforcement across choices. By the same token, as lower level processing allows the choices to be viewed as unrelated, we predict lower level processing will facilitate balancing across decisions even when the choices are seen as relevant for self-image.

To test our propositions, we turn to abstract vs. concrete consumer mindsets, which have been shown to affect cognitive processes and systematically influence consumers’ interpretation of their choices. For example, prior research on sub-goals has demonstrated that in an abstract mindset actions are seen as indicating goal commitment whereas in concrete mindset actions are seen as indicating goal progress (Fishbach et al. 2006). Specific to the current research, an abstract mindset focuses attention on central, holistic features and higher-order goals whereas a concrete mindset facilitates lower-level representations and goals enriched with details (Trope and Liberman 2003). Building on this, we predict that an initial should choice will beget subsequent unrelated should choices when a consumer is in an abstract mindset. Conversely, an initial should choice will facilitate subsequently unrelated want choices when a consumer is in a concrete mindset. We explore this effect and its underlying mechanism in four experiments. For example, in Experiment 1 participants completed a mindset manipulation and subsequently we manipulated if an initial should choice was made (e.g., a choice between cardiovascular activity vs. weight training at the gym) or not. Finally, all participants were given a choice between working on an assignment (a should) or watching a favorite television show (a want). In line with our predictions, we find that initially choosing a should option in an abstract mindset increases the likelihood of subsequently choosing a should option (i.e., working on an assignment); whereas the opposite pattern holds in a concrete mindset. That is, participants in a concrete mindset were more likely to choose a want option (i.e., watching a favorite television show) after an initial should choice.

We replicate this pattern of results across different sets of initial should choices and should vs. want dependent measures, and the results consistently support the predicted interaction between mindsets and an initial want choice. Further, in support of our predicted process, we demonstrate that participants in an abstract mindset rated seemingly unrelated choices as more related compared to those in a concrete mindset. Lastly, we show that relating the initial choice to the self-concept is a key driver of reinforcement in the abstract mindset.

We believe this research has important implications for accomplishing long term, self-improvement goals. Our work goes beyond research on sub-goals (e.g., Fishbach et al. 2006) as we focus on choices that are not directly related and hence provide insight into goals that require persistence on several dimensions that may not be seen in conflict when viewed at a lower level (e.g., maintaining good health and success in exams).

References

We propose a novel consumer self-control strategy, the self-imposition of moral liability. Consumers purposely engage in tempting hedonic activities to increase their motivation to perform subsequent tasks that require self-control. For example, students might prefer to attend a party the night before starting to study for an important exam. Or, consider people’s indulgences during Carnival, which immediately precedes Lent. Building on a mental accounting framework, we show that consumers choose the hedonic behavior to self-impose a moral liability that can be canceled by persisting in the self-control task. For example, farsighted (sophisticated) consumers strategically self-impose guilt when facing self-control problems. Guilt is a self-conscious emotion that induces a desire to repair or undo what we have done to ourselves or to others (Elster 1999; Tangney and Fischer 1995), which yields extra motivation to complete subsequent self-control tasks.

Five studies provide support for our propositions and rule out alternative explanations based on theories of licensing (e.g., Khan and Dhar 2006), balancing (e.g., Dhar and Simonson 1999), self-handicapping (e.g., Berglas and Jones 1978), and ego depletion (e.g., Muraven et al. 1998). Experiment 1 examined consumers’
intuitions about the motivating effects of self-imposed moral liability. Participants predicted the motivational intensity they would experience after resting at home or after going to a party before studying for an exam. For an unimportant task (studying for unimportant exam), resting led to greater predicted motivation and effort, whereas for an important task (studying for an important exam), attending the party led to greater predicted motivation and effort input. These effects on predicted motivation levels were mediated by experienced guilt.

Studies 2 and 3 showed that self-imposed moral liability affects consumer preferences and choices. In study 2, participants who faced a subsequent self-control task, in which they freely chose their effort level (from 1–3 days of volunteer work), were more likely than participants who faced a task with fixed effort levels (3 days of volunteer work) to attend a party in order to motivate themselves to work longer. Individual-level analyses provided further support for our proposition: when the future task effort was fixed, preferences did not differ, whereas when the future task effort was variable (and thus required greater self-control), those low in (self-rated) self-control were more likely to party than stay at home. In study 3, consumers with a variable-effort future self-control task (hiking to 1, 2, or 3 sites) were more likely to buy more luxurious hiking boots than those facing a fixed task (hiking to 3 sites).

Study 4 showed that those who were less confident in their ability to finish an important future task that were more likely to reward themselves before the task (rather than after the task) than those who were more confident. In contrast, when the future self-control task was not important, there was no such difference between those who were more and less confident, again consistent with our proposition that consumers self-impose moral liability to build up their motivation for a future task.

Finally, we examined the dynamics of motivation before and after a decision. We hypothesized that high planners (those who chronically think from a long term perspective) are more likely to self-impose moral liability as a self-control strategy than low planners. Results confirmed our proposition: high planners were more likely to indulge when facing a challenging future task. More importantly, for high planners, those who indulged predicted higher self-efficacy for their future task completion than a control group (high planners who didn’t make a choice at all) and those who chose not to indulge. In contrast, low planners showed no difference among these three conditions, suggesting that the low planners’ choice of indulgence was not driven by the strategic self-imposition of moral liability.

These results provide converging evidence for our hypothesis of self-imposing moral liability as a self-control strategy. They contribute to the growing literature on consumer self-control by demonstrating a new type of self-control strategy, in addition to the well-known strategies of exercising willpower (e.g., Hoch and Loewenstein 1991; Baumeister 2002) and precommitment (e.g., Ariely and Wertebroch 2002; Wertebroch 1998). They also add to the extant literature on emotions, which suggests that people avoid negative emotions. In contrast, our results suggest that consumers strategically self-impose moral liability, a specific type of aversive negative emotion.

References

“Wanting What I Shouldn’t Have and Finding a Way to Get It: When Guilt Increases Hedonic Consumption”
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Consumer researchers have been interested in guilt because it affects hedonic consumption. Specifically, guilty individuals tend to self-deprive and self-punish (Bybee 1998). As a result, guilt has been shown to be incompatible with hedonic want consumption. This is particularly true for consumers high in an individual measure called guilt-proneness (GP henceforth; Tangney et al. 1992). These guilty, high GP consumers have been shown to consistently reduce consumption of hedonic products (Zemack-Rugar 2009, Zemack-Rugar et al. 2007).

In the present research, we reverse these findings. We provide evidence that guilty participants high in GP sometimes indulge more than both neutral and other guilty (low GP) participants. We examine a situation in which the hedonic product is attached to a charitable cause. We demonstrate several unique effects. We show that attaching a social cause to a hedonic product (1) leads to a larger increase in consumption for guilty, high GP, than for neutral (or guilty, low GP) participants, (2) leads to an increase in consumption even when the charity is disliked or distrusted, and (3) leads to an increase in consumption even when a non-hedonic option associated with charity is available.

In five studies we demonstrate these effects and argue for an underlying process of emotion-regulation. Specifically, we argue that since hedonic consumption is pleasant, it offers the opportunity to feel better. Guilty participants want this opportunity. However, selecting this want product can feel like a should not for guilty, high GP participants who find self-reward inappropriate. Attaching a helping opportunity (e.g., charity) to the product turns the should not into a should allowing guilty, high GP consumers to enjoy what they truly want!

In studies 1a and 1b, we demonstrate our basic effects. We place participants in a neutral/guilty emotion and offer a choice between a utilitarian product and a hedonic want product with/without charity. We also measure GP. We find a three-way interac-
tion of emotion by charity presence by guilt proneness. Participants who are guilty and high in GP indulge more than guilty, low GP and neutral participants. Thus we show that attaching a charity does not simply “rebound” guilty, high GP participants to the level of hedonic consumption typical of their neutral (and low GP) counterparts, but rather catapults them to a hedonic consumption level higher than both.

To further examine this theory, we create a situation in which the charity attached to the hedonic product is disliked. According to existing theories, liking of the charity is critically important (Bhattacharya and Sen 1993). However, we argue that for guilty, high GP individuals, it is not critical. Specifically, if helping is what it takes to allow a guilty, high GP consumer to enjoy the emotional benefits of what they want, then the guilty, high GP consumer will be motivated to interpret any helping as sufficient justification for hedonic consumption.

In study 2 we provided neutral/guilty participants with a hedonic product associated with either a liked/disliked charity and measured GP. We predicted that guilty participants high in GP would be most likely to increase consumption of the “wanted” hedonic product even when the charity was disliked. This was confirmed.

In study 3 we examine this tendency of guilty, high GP consumers to turn want into should through meager excuses, by associating the hedonic product with either a trustworthy/non trustworthy charity. As in study 2, we find that guilty, high GP participants increased consumption of the hedonic product associated with the non-trusted charity compared to both neutral and guilt, low GP participants and compared to when the charity was trusted.

A study in progress examines whether these effects occur simply because guilty, high GP individuals are most likely to help or because they seek an excuse to consume the want item. We provided guilty participants with a pleasant (chocolate for charity) and an unpleasant (cold water dunk for charity) helping option. If guilty, high GP participants just want to help, they should choose the unpleasant charity. However, if they want the dual benefits of helping and indulging, they should choose the pleasant charity. Initial (directional) data shows that guilty, high GP participants chose the pleasant charity more often than the unpleasant one.

These findings together suggest that due to the need to feel better, guilty consumers want to indulge in pleasant and fun hedonic products, but feel they should not. Attaching any charity cause to these products, no matter how meager, gives these consumers a way to do so!

References