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The Fresh Start Effect: Temporal Landmarks Motivate Aspirational Behavior

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Three field studies show that aspirational behaviors (dieting, exercising, and goal pursuit) increase following temporal landmarks (e.g., the outset of a week/month/year; birthdays; holidays). Lab studies show that temporal landmarks relegate one's imperfections to the past and make the current self feel superior and thus capable of pursuing its aspirations.

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Indulgent or Industrious? How Seemingly Separate Events Influence Our Consumption Choices

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Paper #1: BYOB: How Bringing Your Own Shopping Bags Leads to Indulging Yourself and the Environment

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Paper #2: The Nearly Winning Effect

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Paper #3: From Fan to Fat?: Vicarious Losing Increases Unhealthy Eating, but Self-Affirmation Is an Effective Remedy

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Paper #4: The Fresh Start Effect: Temporal Landmarks Motivate Aspirational Behavior

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Understanding how people make decisions about consumption, particularly indulgences, is important from the perspective of not only marketing but also public health and policy. Much of the existing research examines decisions in which a more virtuous/healthy option is contrasted with a more indulgent/unhealthy one. Furthermore, the experimental target is often to understand how related goals or particular attributes of the choice targets might bias the outcome. However, in everyday life, consumption decisions can arise in a manner that is intertwined with other considerations. A choice to go to a party might add social elements or framing to a decision to accept an alcoholic drink, or to absent-mindedly dip in to a bowl of chips. Thus this session examines how seemingly separate events can influence individuals to pursue more or less indulgent consumption paths. The events studied range from personal choices or experiences to entirely exogenous occurrences. However, across findings, their impact on consumption appears to be related to how important a person feels the event is to their own self and/or goals.

To better approach the complexity of these effects, the work in this session represents both laboratory experiments, and empirical analyses of “real world” data. The first paper, by Karmarkar and Bollinger, shows that taking an environmentally virtuous action caused grocery shoppers to reward themselves by increasing purchases of indulgent foods in addition to purchasing more “green” items. But it also shows that this result was sensitive to common competing motivations. In the second paper by Wadhwa and Kim, losing a chance based game subsequently led to an increased desire for unrelated rewarding items. Notably, this effect was dependent on how strongly the loss was felt – that is, on the game’s outcome being “near-win.”

The work by Cornil and Chandon extends beyond losing a game oneself, to watching others lose. Using archival and experimental data, they find that a loss in a sporting event can increase consumption of unhealthy food by fans who identify with the losing team. This effect was tied to degree to which the loss was felt as a personal one. Balancing these data on increased indulgences, work by Dai, Milkman and Riis, provides evidence that externally defined events can also promote more “industrious” choices when they are seen as opportunities or signals for the individual to make a fresh start.

Again, the power of these events arose from how meaningful they were to the individual.

As implied, these papers raise the general question of how important self-identification with an event is as a mechanism (or moderator) for these effects. Related discussion questions are 1) whether it is also important that the acts of consumption are strongly affective and/or associated with the self and 2) whether the impact of separate events is related to being an unconscious influence, or a conscious motivation. By combining experimental results with field (or empirical) data, these findings may provide practical suggestions for “making a difference,” in addition to appealing to researchers who study consumption, health-related behavior and goals/motivation.

BYOB: Bringing Your Own Shopping Bags Leads to Indulging Yourself and the Environment

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

As concerns about climate change and resource availability become more central in the public discourse, the use of reusable grocery bags has been strongly promoted as an environmentally and socially conscious virtue. Thus it is useful to ask whether adoption of this behavior could subconsciously influence consumers’ in-store choices (e.g. Dijksterhuis et al. 2005). As a physical reminder of a virtuous act, reusable bags might be assumed to prime shoppers’ attention or motivation towards environmentally responsible products. Similarly, bringing one’s own bags could be self-signaling, suggesting to the consumer that they themselves are “green” or “good”, leading to a higher spend on organic or healthy foods and possibly avoiding indulgent ones, for the sake of consistency.

However, we propose that as an indicator of a virtuous self, bringing a bag gives shoppers permission to make *less* virtuous choices. Such a result is consistent with licensing effects, in which a virtuous action in one domain allows individuals to select indulgences in subsequent choices (Fishbach and Dhar, 2005, Khan and Dhar 2006). Here we demonstrate support for both priming and licensing effects of bringing one’s own grocery bags via a combination of experimental studies and empirical analysis of real world shopping data.

In our first study, participants (N = 74) were asked to examine a schematic of a grocery store layout, and to imagine going to shop at this store. We asked participants to list ten food items they would be likely to purchase during this trip. People who imagined they had brought reusable bags with them listed significantly more indulgent items, such as desserts or snack chips, than those who had received no information about bags ($F(1,72) = 4.39, p < .05$).

A second experimental study investigated whether this increased consideration of indulgent purchases was accompanied by an increase in their perceived value. Participants (N=377) again were instructed to imagine shopping for groceries, and were (were not) told that they had brought their own bags with them. They then indicated their willingness to pay (WTP) for groceries from “green”, “hedonic” and “baseline” (e.g. canned soup) categories. In an additional manipulation, participants either did, or did not, see prices associated with each item. For the group who received no price information, those who imagined shopping with reusable bags showed a relatively higher WTP for *both* green ($F(1,337)=8.52; p < .005$) and hedonic ($F(1,373)=13.97; p < .001$) foods as compared to the baseline.

However, when price information was present, no effects of bringing a bag were found for either category.

Together, these experimental results suggest that the use of reusable shopping bags might have a significant influence on grocery purchasing behavior in stores. However, the findings here are sensitive to other information, such as the salience of reference prices. Thus it was important to examine whether these results existed “in the field”, where consumers are exposed to many different competing influences. In addition, using real data meant that the decisions reflected true incentive compatibility, in comparison to the hypothetical experimental situations.

Thus as a third study, we performed an empirical analysis of cardholder transaction data from one location of a large U.S. grocery store chain. The data include over 2 million transactions by approximately 60,000 households, although we restrict the sample to frequent shoppers. Transactions in which the consumers had their own shopping bags were identified by a small monetary bag credit. Using a rich set of controls, we found that having one’s own bags increased consumers’ probability of purchasing both hedonic items (e.g. chips and high sugar foods like desserts or candy) as well as organic versions of products. These data also show how the effects of bringing one’s own bag are sensitive to common competing motivations. In studies 1 and 2, the data was restricted to individuals who did not have dependents under the age of 18, as the presence of children in a household has distinct influences on grocery basket composition, particularly in the realm of health conscious choices (Mangleburg, 1990; Prasad et al, 2008;). For study 3, we designed one set of controls to identify shoppers with young dependents in their household. Our analysis confirmed that the effects of bringing one’s own bag on indulgent purchasing only held for those consumers who *did not* show other purchases related to having very young children.

We demonstrate that remembering to bring one’s own grocery bags may license consumers to treat themselves while also priming them to treat the environment. This suggests that consumers would be particularly sensitive to the impulse indulgences often found at checkout registers, as the presence of the bags becomes highly salient at this point. It also predicts that environmentally related products could benefit from this stage of the shopping experience, since their consideration should be increased as well. In addition, seating our effect within the licensing literature suggests that its occurrence is dependent on consumers’ having some agency in choosing to bring their bags (Khan and Dhar 2006). Thus as several communities, cities and countries consider laws banning disposable bags (New York Times, 2012), the strength of these effects are likely to depend more on individual consumer’s attributions for whether they (or the government) are the reason they are bringing their own bags.

The Nearly Winning Effect

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Prior research on goal gradient theory has shown that one’s motivational drive associated with a reward intensifies with increasing advancement toward the reward (Hull 1983). These findings raise an interesting question—what would happen to this intensified motivational drive when one nearly wins a reward? To answer this question, we turn to an emerging body of research on motivation, which suggests that the motivational drive is more general in nature, such that once induced through an incidental cue, it could lead to a broad array of reward seeking behaviors (Van den Bergh, Dewitte and Warlop 2008; Wadhwa, Shiv and Nowlis 2008). Drawing upon these findings, we propose that the intensified but unsatiated motivational drive induced as a result of nearly winning a reward could enhance

the desire to seek subsequent unrelated rewards. We term this effect, the “nearly winning” effect. We examine our nearly winning effect hypothesis in four studies, including a field study, and also rule out alternative accounts related to mood and arousal.

In Study 1, we tested our basic research hypothesis related to the nearly winning effect. The winning factor was manipulated by having participants play an eight trial game, similar to the computer game—minesweeper—where they saw a box of 16 tiles, half of which contained a rock, while other half contained a diamond. If they managed to find eight diamonds, they could win a pen. The game was rigged such that in the clearly-losing condition, participants only managed to find one out of the eight diamonds. In order to examine our argument related to increasing advancement toward the reward, we included two nearly-winning conditions in this study. In both the nearly-winning conditions, participants managed to find seven of the eight diamonds. However, in one of the conditions, participants missed a diamond on the eighth trial (nearly-winning-advancement) whereas in the other condition, participants missed a diamond on the second trial itself (nearly-winning-no advancement). Therefore, in the nearly winning-no advancement condition, while participants still nearly won the reward, they were aware of losing the reward from the second trial and thus the feeling of advancement toward the reward was attenuated early on. Subsequently, participants were informed that they could return their survey and collect a small gift (a chocolate bar) from another experimenter at the end of the corridor. The speed with which they walked to get the chocolate bar became the main dependent variable in this study. Consistent with the nearly winning hypothesis, our results show that those who missed a diamond on the eighth trial in the computer game (nearly-winning-advancement condition) showed a greater desire for chocolate bar, as manifested in the walking speed toward the chocolate bar, than those in the nearly-winning-no advancement or clearly-losing conditions. Furthermore, there was no difference in walking speed between the nearly-winning-no advancement and the clearly-losing conditions. Given there was no difference in these two conditions, in the subsequent studies, we dropped the nearly winning-no advancement condition.

In the second study, we sought to provide stronger support for our underlying conceptualization by examining the role of reward value in moderating the nearly-winning effect. Further, in this study, we used level of salivation toward a reward as a way to measure one’s desire for a reward (Gal 2012). We argue that if the nearly winning effect is driven by a general increase in desire for a reward, then those in the nearly-winning condition versus clearly-losing condition should salivate more when presented with an unrelated high reward value item, but not a low reward value item. The winning factor was manipulated using the same game used in the first study and the reward value was manipulated by having participants view a picture of either a high reward value (100 dollar bills) or a low reward value (five cents) item. Our findings provide support for our hypothesis—nearly winning versus clearly losing in the game subsequently led to a higher salivation level toward an unrelated high reward value item, but not toward a low reward value item. No such difference was found in the level of salivation for participants in the clearly-losing condition. Moreover, there were no differences found in the mood or arousal levels across conditions in this or in subsequent studies.

In the third study, we provide further support for our conceptualization related to the activated motivation drive by showing that the nearly-winning effect gets attenuated when the motivational drive is dampened in an intervening task. Participants played the same game used in the previous two studies. In this study, we also included a winning condition (wherein participants did manage to find all the

eight diamonds). Subsequently, we manipulated the motivational drive dampening by having participants sample either an unpleasant odor or a neutral odor (adopted from Wadhwa et al., 2008). Participants then engaged in a purportedly unrelated card arranging reward responsivity objective test (CARROT; Powell et al. 1996), which measures how much effort an individual exerts to earn a reward. Consistent with our predictions, those in the nearly-winning condition, versus clearly-losing condition and clearly-winning conditions, exerted significantly more effort to earn an unrelated reward (as measured by CARROT). Further, this nearly winning effect was attenuated when the motivational drive was dampened in an unrelated intervening task.

In the last study, we test the generalizability of the nearly winning effect by conducting a field study at a fashion-accessory store. Consumers participated in a short survey in an exchange for a chance to win \$20 gift certificate by playing an instant scratch-off lottery. Consumers were randomly assigned to one of the three winning conditions where they won (clearly-winning) the lottery, or lost the lottery by one digit, which was the last digit (nearly-winning) or by the last five digits (clearly-losing). The amount they spent in the store became the main dependent variable in this study. Consistent with our predictions, our findings show that those who nearly won the reward spent significantly more than those who clearly won or lost the reward.

In sum, findings from this research show that nearly winning a reward as compared to clearly losing or winning a reward can activate a general motivational drive leading to a broad array of reward seeking behaviors.

From Fan to Fat?: Vicarious Losing Increases Unhealthy Eating, but Self-Affirmation Is an Effective Remedy

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Sport watching is more popular than ever: 108 million Americans watched the 2013 NFL Super Bowl and 2.2 billion people watched the 2010 FIFA soccer World Cup. Using archival and experimental data, we explore whether the vicarious defeats and victories that supporters experience influence their ability to regulate their food intake.

Supporters tend to perceive their team's successes and failures as theirs (Hirt et al. 1992), which has a measurable effect on their self-regulation abilities. Football and soccer defeats, especially when they are narrow or unexpected, increase alcohol-related criminality (Rees and Schnepel 2009), traffic fatalities (Wood, McInnes, and Norton 2011), and domestic violence (Card and Dahl 2011).

Consistent with studies showing that ego threats increase preferences for indulgent food (Baumeister, Heatherton, and Tice 1993), we expected that people would eat less healthily after the defeat of a football team that they support. Second, as vicarious sports victories improve the perceived self-worth of supporters (Hirt et al. 1992), we hypothesized that vicarious football victories would lead to healthier eating. Third, we expected that allowing supporters to self-affirm after experiencing a vicarious defeat would eliminate its impact on unhealthy eating, as self-affirmation reduces the impact of vicarious sports defeats on self-serving biases (Sherman et al. 2007) and, more generally, improves people's self-regulation abilities (Schmeichel and Vohs 2009).

The first study is a quasi-experiment in which we examined the self-reported daily food consumption of a representative panel of 730 US consumers and 3150 consumption days, during two NFL seasons. We assumed that most people in the panel watch football games and support the team of the city where they live, based on sur-

veys showing that about 60% of Americans declare being NFL fans (Gallup 2012). We examined the effects of 450 Sunday games on consumption on the day of the game and on the following Monday and Tuesday. We measured unhealthy eating by calculating saturated fat consumption and calorie intake from the food consumption data provided by the panelists.

Compared to their average consumption, people consumed 16% more saturated fat and 10% more calories on Monday if their team had lost the day before but consumed 9% less saturated fat and 5% less calories if their team had won. In contrast, consumption was at its usual level on the same Monday among people assigned to control groups: those living in cities without an NFL team and those living in cities whose NFL team did not play on that Sunday. Second, we found that the outcome of the game had no effect on food consumption on the Sunday of the game and on the following Tuesday. This shows that the Monday effects were not compensated on the subsequent day or anticipated on the previous day. Third, we found that these effects were particularly strong when the outcome of the game was uncertain, as measured by a low point spread in the bookmakers' predictions. This suggests that surprise and disappointment are important drivers of the effect. Fourth, we found that saturated fat consumption was especially low when the victory was crushing and particularly high when the defeat was tight, which is consistent with the literature on close-call counterfactual thinking (Medvec and Savitsky 1997). Finally, we found that the effects were stronger in cities where people identify the most to their NFL team (based on survey data): a 28% increase in saturated fat consumption following a defeat, and a 16% decrease following a victory. Gender did not moderate these results, which is consistent with extant studies on the impact of game outcomes on cardiac accidents (Carroll et al. 2002; Klöner et al. 2011).

We replicated these results in a controlled laboratory experiment in France. Participants were asked to describe either a victory or a defeat by their favorite sport team. After this, they were given the opportunity to eat different foods. We found that people asked to think about a defeat ate more unhealthy food and less healthy food than people asked to think about a victory. Three coders also measured the extent to which the participants engaged in spontaneous self-affirmation when describing the sporting event. As expected, we found that spontaneous self-affirmation helped vicarious losers limit their consumption of unhealthy food.

In a third study, we asked a representative panel of French participants to watch a 7-minute video of a soccer game and manipulated self-affirmation. Participants were randomly assigned to a 3 (defeat, victory, control) x 2 (self-affirmation, control) between-subject design. The games of the victory and defeat conditions were important finals that the French national soccer team had either won (Euro 2000) or lost (World Cup 2006) against its archrival, the Italian national team. The control game opposed two Belgian soccer teams, irrelevant to participants' identity. In the self-affirmation condition, participants were asked after watching the videos to rank their core values and to elaborate on their top-ranked value (McQueen and Klein 2006). Participants in the control condition were asked to list the important features of chairs. Then, we measured participants' desire for various foods. Compared to the control condition, watching the defeat video increased preferences for less healthy food whereas watching the victory video increased preferences for healthier food. As expected, the effect in the defeat condition was attenuated when participants could affirm their core values.

These results contribute to the literature on self-control by showing how an important contextual factor of everyday life (sporting events) can promote or hinder healthy eating. We also show how

the interplay between sport watching and eating relates to identity issues. A simple self-affirmation intervention can eliminate the unhealthy consequences of the vicarious defeat. Ultimately, this research has important managerial and political implications: we show what kinds of games are susceptible to raise health issues, providing precious information to regulators -and socially responsible advertisers- concerned with the obesity epidemic.

The Fresh Start Effect: Temporal Landmarks Motivate Aspirational Behavior

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The notion that renewal is possible and offers individuals an opportunity to improve themselves has long been endorsed by our culture. For example, many religious groups engage in ritual purification ceremonies, Christians can be “born again,” and the metaphorical phoenix rising from the ashes ubiquitously represents rebirth. This suggests a widely shared belief that we have opportunities throughout our lives to start fresh with a clean slate, with the well-known “New Year’s effect” representing just one example of a far broader phenomenon. The current research explores naturally-arising points in time when an individual is particularly motivated to engage in aspirational behaviors (or activities that help people achieve their wishes and personal goals).

Past research suggests that temporal landmarks, including personally-relevant life events (e.g., anniversaries, birthdays) and reference points on the calendar (e.g., holidays, the start of a new week/month/year/semester) demarcate the passage of time and create discontinuities in our memories, experiences, and time perceptions (Robinson, 1986; Shum, 1998). Further, temporal landmarks may increase the subjective distance between a person’s current self and past self (Libby & Eibach, 2002; Peetz & Wilson, 2013; Wilson & Ross, 2003). The theory of temporal self-appraisal posits that the more disconnected people feel from their past selves, the more likely they are to disparage their past selves (Wilson & Ross, 2001). By doing so, they are able to maintain a positive perception of themselves in spite of past failures (Wilson & Ross, 2001). Consequently, we conjecture that temporal landmarks separate people from their imperfect past selves, which makes them feel superior and thus capable of pursuing their aspirations. We hypothesize that this process of wiping the slate clean generates fresh start feelings and motivates people to tackle their goals.

Across three studies, we document evidence of the proposed “fresh start effect” in the field. Study 1 examines public interest in a widespread goal – dieting – by using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to predict daily Google search volume for the term “diet” ($N_{\text{days}}=3,104$). We find that relative to baseline, interest in dieting increases at the start of new weeks (by 14.4%), months (by 3.7%), and calendar years (by 82.1%), and following Federal holidays (by 10.2%; particularly following holidays that survey respondents report “feel more like a fresh start”) (all p ’s<0.001).

Study 2 moves from measuring intentions to actions by examining the actual frequency of engagement in another aspirational behavior – exercise – using university gym attendance records ($N_{\text{members}}=11,912$, $N_{\text{days}}=442$). Again, OLS regressions show that relative to baseline, the probability of visiting the gym increases at the beginning of the week (by 33.4%), month (by 14.4%), year (by 11.6%), and semester (by 47.1%), as well as following school breaks (by 24.3%) (all p ’s<0.05). Also, birthdays (with the exception of 21st birthdays) increase gym attendance by 7.5% (p <0.001), indicating that personal temporal landmarks, like calendar landmarks, can produce a “fresh start effect”.

Study 3 uses data from the goal-setting website StickK.com to examine a wider range of goals (including job, educational and financial pursuits). OLS regressions ($N_{\text{goals}}=66,062$, $N_{\text{days}}=866$) show that people are more likely to create goal contracts at the beginning of a week (by 62.9%), month (by 23.6%), year (by 145.3%), and following Federal holidays (by 55.1%; again particularly following holidays that feel like fresh starts), as well as following their birthdays (by 2.6%) (all p ’s<0.05 except birthdays: $p=0.07$). Importantly, we find that temporal landmarks motivate people to tackle a broad set of health-irrelevant goals (e.g., “study harder for GMATs”), suggesting that the fresh start effect is not merely the result of efforts to rebalance one’s health after over-indulging.

Three additional laboratory studies provide support for our hypothesized mechanism. In Study 4, we manipulated the psychological meaning associated with a temporal landmark. Participants ($N=303$) read about a middle-aged female, Jane, who was not satisfied with her weight and would soon start a new position at work. In this three-condition, between-subject experiment, participants were told either that Jane (a) viewed the new job as a meaningful life change, but it would not affect her daily routines; (b) did not view the job change as meaningful, but it would shift her daily routines; or (c) did not consider the job change to be meaningful, and it would not shift her daily routines. Participants then rated how motivated Jane would be to add healthier habits to her life following the change. As expected, a meaningful job change was perceived to be more likely to motivate health improvements than a job change described in either of the other two conditions (p s < .001). Furthermore, participants’ rating of the extent to which the new job would feel like a fresh start to Jane fully mediated the effect of the meaningful job change on Jane’s motivation to improve her health.

Studies 5a ($N=199$) and 5b ($N=203$) present scenarios examining the effects of two different temporal landmarks: moving to a new city (5a) and celebrating a birthday (5b). We replicate our Study 4 finding that more meaningful temporal landmarks generate stronger fresh start feelings and thus are perceived as more likely to motivate aspirational behaviors (in this case, quitting smoking) than less meaningful but objectively equivalent temporal landmarks. We also measured the extent to which participants believed each scenario’s protagonist would feel (1) disconnected from his/her past self, and (2) close to his/her ideal self. Supporting our proposal mechanism, mediation analysis shows that fresh start feelings following temporal landmarks originate from a psychological dissociation from one’s past self and a perceived increase in closeness to one’s ideal self.

Together, this research investigates how and why temporal landmarks can affect individuals’ motivation to engage in aspirational behaviors. Organizations and individuals may be able to capitalize on various temporal landmarks to facilitate goal pursuit. Also, marketers of products designed to help people attain desirable objectives (e.g., gym memberships, healthy restaurants, online education programs) may be best able to appeal to consumers’ desires for self-improvement by advertising to consumers at fresh start moments.

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