Emotions Shape Construal Levels: the Case of Guilt and Shame

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Three experiments show that emotions influence subsequent decision-making by systematically altering construal levels. Guilt (shame) led individuals to adopt lower (higher) levels of construal in subsequent decisions. Thus, guilt (shame)-laden individuals tend to prefer products with high feasibility (desirability) features.

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The Depths of Pleasure, the Throes of Despair: Exploring the Multifaceted Nature of Hedonic Emotional Experiences
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Paper #1: Crime…and Punishment: The Effects of Context on Signal Strength and the Consequences for Condemnation
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Paper #2: Emotions Shape Construal Levels: The Case of Guilt and Shame
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Paper #3: Beyond Funny Ads: Empirical and Theoretical Insights into Humorous Consumption and Marketing
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Paper #4: Prolonging the Search for Meaning: How Hedonic Versus Eudaemonic Consumption Experiences Shape Preference for Variety
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SESSION OVERVIEW
The pursuit of pleasure shapes consumers’ attempts to socially bond and fulfill their desires, as well as their responses to marketing activities. Indeed, hedonic pursuits guide choice (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000), self-regulation (Fishbach and Labroo 2007), and brand preference (Hagtvedt and Patrick 2009). Recently, there has been renewed interest in understanding the mechanics of pleasure, and the role that hedonic pursuits play in consumers’ lives (Alba and Williams 2012; Haws and Poyner 2008). Although it has been long assumed that the pursuit of pleasure is the hallmark for rational human behavior (Bentham 1789), such pursuits often feature a dark side, involving failures of impulse control (Loewenstein 1996) and their corresponding negative emotions (e.g., guilt; Giner-Sorolla 2001). As we prepare to turn our focus “back to fun,” the papers presented in this session explore the complexity of hedonic pursuits and their consequences.

Goldsmith and Hershfield demonstrate that judgments of others’ indulgent behaviors, such as overeating, overspending, and gambling, are sensitive to the context in which the behavior occurs. Judges are less harsh when the indulgent behavior occurs in an atypical (vs. familiar) context. Han and colleagues ask what are the consequences of guilt and shame, two negative feelings that often arise following hedonic pursuits. They find that these discrete negative emotions shift the way people construe their mental worlds. Warren and McGraw extend their examination of the nature of humor, demonstrating that humorous consumption and humorous marketing tactics involve both safety and pain. Finally, Carter and Williams distinguish between hedonic (fun) and eudaemonic (meaningful) consumption experiences, showing that consumers seek variety when exposed to the former, but prefer prolonged exposure to the latter.

Collectively, these papers seek to add to the literature on understanding the impact of the pursuit of pleasure, and its unintended (sometimes negative) consequences. The session should appeal to consumer researchers interested in indulgent consumption, mixed emotional experiences, the interplay between affect and cognition, and consumer choice. We hope this session will stimulate future theory development on the complexities of hedonic experiences.

Crime…and Punishment: The Effects of Context on Signal Strength and the Consequences for Condemnation
EXTENDED ABSTRACT
It has been widely recognized that consumers attempt to justify their behavior, especially when the behavior is self-indulgent (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000; Kivetz and Keinan 2006; Kivetz and Zheng 2006) and/or violates a personal goal (Goldsmith and Dhar 2013). However, far less is known about if and how consumers might pro-actively utilize elements of the behavioral context in an effort to justify their indiscretions a priori. For example, imagine an individual, Rob, who enjoys gambling; however, he and his wife have a goal to save money. One of his former gambling buddies comes to visit. What might Rob do in order to preemptively justify a gambling indiscretion? The current research takes the perspective of the consumer as a manipulative agent, and argues that consumers who seek to “sin” will pursue a-typical contexts in which to do so, because a-typical contexts deflect the behavioral attribution away from the self. Hence, the same indiscretion will lead to less harsh judgments from others when the behavioral context is a-typical (vs. typical), due to a shift in the extent to which the behavior is seen as reflective of the self.

This prediction raises the important question of what constitutes an a-typical (vs. typical) context. For example, if Rob and his friend were to gamble in Las Vegas this context might be a-typical (provided Rob does not reside in Las Vegas); however, it also has unique behavioral norms regarding gambling, which should logically affect gambling behavior. However, we argue that consumers’ judgment of others can vary even as a function of largely irrelevant contextual factors. Specifically, we examine how condemnation is affected by where the indiscretion took place (a-typical: neutral location far from home vs. typical: neutral location near to home), the person’s familiarity with the context (a-typical: neutral unfamiliar context vs. typical: neutral familiar context), and the person’s mental state at the time of the indiscretion (a-typical: intoxicated vs. typical: sober). Across these studies, we find that observers judge others less harshly for their indiscretions when the behavioral context is a-typical (vs. typical), and that this shift in judgment is mediated by the extent to which the behavior is seen as reflective of the self. Further, we show that the a-typicality of the behavioral context also affects how individuals make choices for themselves, with a-typical contexts (e.g., a “special day”) sanctioning more self-indulgent behavior.

This supports our contention that consumers may pro-actively pursue a-typical contexts in order to engage in self-indulgence (comparatively) free from judgment. We test these predictions in a series of nine lab and field studies. Study 1 tests if people perceive the behaviors of others to be less reflective of the self in a-typical behavioral contexts by having them evaluate a vignette describing an actor who engaged in an indiscretion (e.g. over-eating) on one occasion and a neutral behavior (e.g., maintaining a diet) on another occasion. The behavioral context in which the indiscretion transpired (a-typical: neutral location far from home vs. typical: neutral location near to home) was varied between participants. Participants were asked to indicate how similar they
thought the actor’s authentic self was to the self who indulged using a measure derived from Aron et al.’s (1992) Inclusion-of-the-other-in-the-self scale. Results revealed that when the behavioral context was a-typical, because the actor was away from home, participants indicated there was less overlap between the “self who indulged” and the “authentic self,” as compared to when the indiscretion took place near home ($p = .016$).

Study 2 builds on these results by examining how an actor’s familiarity with the behavioral context (a-typical: neutral unfamiliar context vs. typical: neutral familiar context) affected other’s judgment of their indiscretion (over-spending) and found that when the behavioral context was a-typical, because the actor was in a local shopping mall she had not been to previously, the over-spending was judged less harshly than when the local mall was familiar ($p = .032$). Further, in line with our theoretical mechanism, the over-spending was seen as less reflective of the actor’s self when the context was a-typical as compared to when it was typical ($p = .034$) and the shift in signal strength mediated the relationship between context typicality and judgment (95% CI= -2.278, -.024).

Study 3 provides a conceptual replication for Study 2 by manipulating if the behavioral context was a-typical (vs. typical) by manipulating the description of the actor’s mental state (intoxicated vs. sober). Again, we observed that when the behavioral context was a-typical, here because the actor was drunk, observers condemned the actor’s indiscreriion (gambling) less harshly as compared to when he was described as sober ($p < .001$). Further, results show that the actor’s behavior when intoxicated was seen as less reflective of the actor’s self ($p < .001$) and this shift in signal strength mediated the relationship between context typicality and judgment (95% CI= -.3901 , -1.185).

Study 4 provides a direct replication for Study 3 in addition to demonstrating an important boundary condition. Even though observers may, by default, assume certain behavioral contexts (e.g., intoxication) are a-typical, they should correct these assumptions if the actor is described as having extensive familiarity with the context (e.g., a history of alcohol consumption). Study 4 demonstrates this is the case by revealing that prior exposure to the behavioral context moderates the effect of context typicality on judgment, in addition to ruling out other alternate accounts for the observed results. Study 5 builds on these results by demonstrating that when the observers’ attention is occupied (e.g., due to cognitive load), context typicality has less of an effect on how others are judged. Study 6 uses data from real-world criminal sentencing trials and provides convergence with the observed results by revealing that judges allocated significantly shorter criminal sentences for crimes committed in a-typical (vs. typical) behavioral contexts. The remaining studies (7 – 9) suggest that context typicality has implications for the choices actors make as well, with a-typical (vs. typical) behavioral contexts facilitating more self-indulgent choices.

We conclude by discussing the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

**Emotions Shape Construal Levels: The Case of Guilt and Shame**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Recent research has begun to demonstrate that discrete negative emotions affect consumer attitudes and decision-making. Consumers often experience feelings of guilt and shame in daily life and yet little is known about how guilt and shame affect decision-making. For example, consumers may feel guilty when they engage in overeating or they may feel ashamed after a night of binge drinking. Given their prevalence in consumer experience and marketing communications, it is critical to understand how these discrete emotions affect how consumers process information and make subsequent decisions. However, scant research has explored how feelings of shame and guilt influence subsequent decisions unrelated to guilt or shame. The current research aims to advance extant consumer research by shedding light on how guilt and shame influence information processing, judgments and decisions.

Our research employs construal level theory (Trope and Liberman 2003, 2010) to illuminate one such psychological process triggered by the experience of these two emotional states. It has been speculated that emotional experiences may change how individuals construe information in a subsequent task. We build on this general assertion and propose that guilt and shame may influence judgments and decisions by systematically altering the level at which information is construed. Specifically, we posit that guilt leads consumers to construe subsequent situations at lower levels whereas shame leads them to adopt higher levels of construal. Guilt (shame) will systematically influence subsequent decisions by prompting a preference for lower- (higher-) level construal features. We also examine the psychological processes underlying these changes in construal level.

Both shame and guilt are negative self-conscious emotions that lead individuals to see themselves as the agent of socially undesirable outcomes. Recent research has begun to tease apart how these two emotions impact subsequent judgments and behaviors (Dearing et al. 2005; Duhachek et al. 2012). Previous research disambiguates discrete emotions of guilt and shame according to the unique appraisals that give rise to each (Lewis 1971; Tangney and Dearing 2002; Tracy and Robins 2004). In particular, guilt is experienced when individuals appraise negative outcomes to a specific action. In contrast, shame is experienced when individuals attribute the negative outcomes to the entire self. Guilt-laden individuals are likely to focus on the specific behavior or situation, resulting in behavior-specific appraisals whereas shame-laden individuals are likely to focus on the global self, leading to global-self appraisals when negative events occur.

Furthermore, building on the Appraisal-Tendency Framework (ATF; Lerner and Keltner 2001; Lerner et al. 2007), we posit that since guilt is caused by behavior-specific appraisals, individuals experiencing guilt may view subsequent events in a consistent way with their appraisals, activating local appraisal tendencies that lead individuals to give greater weight to specific aspects of subsequent situations. In contrast, individuals experiencing shame may view the subsequent tasks in line with their global-self appraisals, activating global appraisal tendencies that give greater weight to global aspects of events.

Next, we posit that these appraisal tendency-based differences between the two emotions may systematically alter the way individuals construe subsequent information. According to CLT, when considering the specific behaviors and situations, individuals tend to adopt lower levels of construal. In contrast, when considering personalities and dispositions, individuals tend to adopt a higher level construal (Nussbaum et al. 2003). Bringing the CLT framework into the emotions literature, we argue that individuals experiencing guilt may construe information at a lower level since individuals experiencing guilt are more likely to consider the context in which a specific behavior occurred than the global aspects of a subsequent task. Conversely, because individuals experiencing shame may consider global or dispositional aspects in a subsequent task to a greater degree, we propose that individuals experiencing shame may adopt higher level construals.
Based on our proposition, we predict a carry-over effect of guilt on subsequent judgments such that options with lower construal level features (i.e., high feasibility) are preferred to options with higher construal level features (i.e., high desirability). We predict that shame leads to the opposite pattern in subsequent decisions. Further, we posit that these effects operate through unique appraisal tendencies resulting from the emotion.

We tested the proposed effects and the underlying processes in three studies. In study 1, we manipulated emotions by having participants to recall an incident where they felt guilt or shame or what they did yesterday (i.e., control condition) and then measured construal level using the BIF scale (Vallacher and Wegner 1989), which measured the level at which individuals construe certain activities (i.e., lower score implies an activation of low construal mindsets). Results shows that that participants in the guilt (vs. control) condition activated lower construal levels (BIF\textsubscript{guilt} = 12.29 vs. BIF\textsubscript{control} = 14.97; p < .05) while those in the shame (vs. control) condition activated higher construal levels (BIF\textsubscript{shame} = 18.25 vs. BIF\textsubscript{control} = 14.97; p < .02). In studies 2 and 3, we extend our theorizing in the judgment context by presenting options varying in their feasibility and desirability (Study 2: choice of a concert varying in interest versus price; Study 3: choice of auction websites varying on product selection vs. user-friendly interface) and testing how emotions influence preference toward these options. Study 2 found that guilt increases preference for options with high feasibility whereas shame increases preference for options with high desirability. Study 3 replicated the findings of study 2 and illuminated the processes underlying these effects by finding mediation showing that guilt (shame) activates lower- (higher-) level construals via activation of local (global) appraisal tendencies (Please see Table for the results in studies 1-3).

Overall, our findings contribute to the literature on emotions and construal level by showing that discrete negative emotions of guilt and shame provoke distinct construal mindsets as well as by articulating theory and demonstrating empirical evidence to identify specific appraisal mechanisms through which emotions produce distinct mindsets.

Beyond Funny Ads: Empirical and Theoretical Insights into Humorous Consumption and Marketing

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Humor is a fun, hedonic experience enjoyed by consumers across the globe (Gulas and Weinberger 2006; Martin 2007). The marketing literature discusses humor in the context of advertising (Eisen 2009; Gulas and Weinberger 2006), yet consumers experience humor in a wide variety of other consumption-related activities. Consumers spend billions of dollars and countless hours seeking humor in films, television, websites, books, magazines, and even greeting cards. People share laughs with friends, lovers, acquaintances, and strangers on a daily basis (Martin 2007; Provine 2001). Humor helps improve relationships, increases enjoyment, boosts creativity, facilitates coping, and mitigates the perceived intensity of negative life events (Galloway and Crropley 2009; Isen et al. 1987; Keltner and Bonanno 1997; Martin 2002). Humor can also improve social interaction, learning, and development by increasing tolerance for social differences and by facilitating approach towards novel, mildly stressful stimulation (Frederickson 1998; Gervais and Wilson 2005; Martin 2007).

A key reason for marketing’s focus on humorous advertising is its reliance on incongruity-resolution theory, which argues that humor occurs when a person makes sense of (i.e., resolves) an unexpected or abnormal stimulus (Alden et al. 2000; Suls 1972). Although incongruity-resolution theory predicts humor in situations in which there is a set-up followed by a punch line, as is often the case in advertisements, incongruity-resolution theory has a more difficult time predicting humor in other marketing and consumption contexts (see Martin 2007).

Recent research outside of marketing suggests an alternative perspective: humor occurs when a person simultaneously appraises something as both a violation (i.e., anything that threatens a person’s wellbeing, identity, or normative belief structure) and benign (i.e., okay, acceptable, normative; McGraw and Warren 2010; McGraw et al. 2012; Veatch 1998). For example, play fighting, which frequently elicits laughter in both children and non-human primates, involves a physical attack (i.e., violation) that doesn’t hurt (i.e., benign). Puns and wordplay, a source of humor for literate humans, similarly involve a benign violation, typically some a linguistic error that is correct according to another language rule. Our research draws on the benign violation theory (BVT) in order to gain new insight into the antecedents and consequences of humor across a broader range of marketing mix variables and consumption experiences.

Study 1 investigated when consumers experience humor. To see if the BVT offers an improvement over an incongruity-resolutions account, we asked participants (N = 126) to find three YouTube videos: one humorous video, one inspiring video, and one frightening video. A good theory of humor should adequately discriminate between humorous and non-humorous consumption experiences. Therefore, we measured whether or not participants perceived a benign violation or whether or not they perceived a resolved incongruity in each of the videos. Participants received detailed definitions of benign and violation or incongruity and resolution, depending on between-subjects condition, before completing the measures. Incongruity-resolution did not differentiate humorous videos from non-humorous videos—participants were as likely to perceive a resolved incongruity in the inspiring (44%) and frightening (30%) videos as they were in the humorous videos (32%). In contrast, participants were more likely to perceive a benign violation in the humorous videos (47%) than in either the inspiring (17%) or frightening (17%) videos. Thus, BVT better distinguished humorous from non-humorous consumption experiences than the leading humor theory.

The BVT also makes new predictions about the consequences of being funny. One prediction is that consumers are more likely to share content that seems threatening, painful, insulting, taboo, illogical, uncomfortable, or just plain wrong (i.e., content containing a violation) compared to strictly benign content. If viewed from a benign perspective, a violation may counter-intuitively create a positive hedonic experience: humor. Humorous violations may be shared more than content that lacks a violation both because negative information attracts more attention than positive information (Baumeister et al. 2001) and because consumers are more likely to share content that elicits positive rather than negative emotions (Berger and Milkman 2012). We explored whether videos containing violations are more likely to be funny and be shared by consumers by having research assistants code a sample of 76 YouTube videos for violation severity and humor. Consistent with the BVT, violation severity was positively related to views (b = .46, and this effect was mediated by the extent to which the videos were humorous (indirect effect = .31).

Although humor captures the attention of consumers (Madden and Weinberger 1982) and motivates content sharing (study 2), the BVT identifies humor’s dark side. Specifically, because a violation is necessary for humor, humorous marketing can have a negative effect on brand attitudes by arousing negative feelings in addition.
to perceived humor. We tested this idea by contrasting product, distribution, pricing, and promotion tactics depicting benign violations with similar tactics not depicting violations. For example, we compared reactions to a pricing policy that discriminates against wealthier, monolingual English speakers (i.e., a sign reads: Orange Juice $5; Jugo de Naranja $4) with reactions to a store that charges all customers the same price (the sign reads: Orange Juice $5; Jugo de Naranja $5). Most consumers consider blatant price discrimination unfair (i.e., a violation). However, the discrimination may simultaneously seem benign both because it can be justified by an alternative norm (the English speakers can probably afford to pay the extra dollar) and because the discrimination is psychologically distant (it’s geographically distant and victimizes other people). Participants (N = 114) rated perceived humor, negative affective reactions, and brand attitude in response to one of four marketing tactics (product, distribution, price, promotion). Consistent with the BVT, the participants were more likely to perceive humor in the tactics containing benign violations than in the purely benign tactics (67% vs. 12%). However, the humorous benign violations were also more likely to offend participants (4% vs. 56%) and, consequently, led to less favorable attitudes towards the marketer compared to purely benign tactics (M = 2.8 vs. 4.4; seven-point scale). Thus, although benign violations evoke humor and can help capture attention and prompt sharing, marketers need to be careful because benign violations can elicit negative responses in addition to humor.

**Prolonging the Search for Meaning: How Hedonic Versus Eudaemonic Consumption Experiences Shape Preference for Variety**

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Although the quest for pleasure guides many consumer decisions, consumers also obtain utility from non-hedonic sources. Indeed, people are able to derive positive affect from negative emotional experiences, exemplified by the consumption of entertainment that centers around tragic, horrific, or otherwise aversive content (Andrade and Cohen 2007). In the present research, we explore the extent to which consumers’ preferences are differentially affected by exposure to fun versus meaningful consumption experiences.

Guided by re-emergent theorizing emphasizing the philosophical distinction between hedonia (the pursuit of pleasure) and eudaemonia (the pursuit of meaning; Oliver and Raney 2011; Baumeister et al. 2013), we find that people seek variety when consuming hedonic (but not necessarily meaningful) experiences, but prefer stability when consuming eudaemonic (but not necessarily fun) experiences. This pattern suggests that consumers experience a tradeoff between experiencing pleasure in the present, and collecting meaningful experiences over time (cf. Keinan and Kivetz 2011). While eudaemonic consumption experiences might not be as pleasurable in the moment, consumers nevertheless prefer to stick with these meaningful experiences for longer periods of time compared to hedonic experiences, because they believe that the benefits of meaningful experiences will take longer to develop and last longer into the future.

In an initial test (study 1; N = 90), we assessed consumers’ lay intuitions regarding the difference between hedonic and eudaemonic entertainment experiences. We examined people’s beliefs regarding the minimal amount of time they would need to derive a benefit from consuming fun versus meaningful films. We pretested movie genres and identified three hedonic genres (comedies, action, horror) and three corresponding eudaemonic genres (documentaries, drama, art house). Participants were instructed to imagine that they were presented with a two-hour movie from each genre and asked to indicate how many minutes of each movie they would need to watch before they would feel satisfied with the experience. Participants indicated that they would need to watch the meaningful films for a longer period of time to feel satisfied (M = 75.5 minutes), compared to the fun films (M = 62.3 minutes; F(1, 89) = 14.03, p < .001). These results provided initial evidence that consumers seek to prolong their exposure to eudaemonic experiences.

We next examined in study 2 (N = 138) whether people would prefer stay the course or switch to something new when their hedonic versus eudaemonic consumption experiences were interrupted. Participants recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk were randomly assigned to view either a fun or meaningful 10-minute film (selected on the basis of a pre-test). Four minutes into the film, participants were interrupted and told that the study included other films. As the primary DV, participants were asked to indicate whether they would prefer to (1) continue watching the film they had been initially assigned to, (2) switch to a different but similar film from the same genre, or (3) switch to a different but dissimilar film from a different genre. To examine our hypothesis that participants watching the meaningful film would be less likely to switch to a different film than subjects watching the fun film, we conducted a logistic regression. Subjects in the eudaemonic condition were significantly less likely to choose to switch to a different film than subjects in the hedonic condition (31% vs. 55%; Wald = 7.68, p < .01).

In study 3 (N = 184), we aimed to replicate and extend study 2 by examining the process by which exposure to hedonic versus eudaemonic experiences shapes consumers’ variety-seeking preferences. Hedonic experiences should be more impactful in the present, whereas eudaemonic experiences (emphasizing a search for meaning and self-growth) should have a lasting impact into the future. Indeed, the utility of watching meaningful (but not necessarily pleasurable) films such as Hotel Rwanda and Schindler’s List is often not felt immediately, but instead at a later point (e.g., after one reflects upon the movie watching experience). Such considerations led us to hypothesize that people would be less likely to seek variety when exposed to meaningful (vs. hedonic) experiences because they expect the benefit of meaningful experiences to persist into the future. Accordingly, we again find that those exposed to part of a meaningful (versus hedonic) film were less likely to switch to a different film (33% vs. 48%; Wald = 3.99, p < .05). Importantly, we also find that this effect on stay-versus-switch decisions was mediated by participants’ expectations that exposure to the meaningful (versus hedonic) film would have a lasting impact, changing who they are, how they think, and their outlook on life (b = -.16, 95% CI: -.27 to -.07).

Our final study (study 4; N = 94) examines an important boundary condition for consumers’ ability to derive deeper meaning from a consumption experience. The ability to find meaning should depend on consumers’ level of expertise with the experience (LaTour and LaTour 2010). To illustrate, classically trained musicians should be in a better position to derive eudaemonic meaning from concerts, compared to musical novices. Hence, we predict that experts would find it easier to find meaning in a consumption experience, which in turn will reduce their desire for varied experiences. To test this prediction, we presented participants with a short video featuring a musical performance. Participants were instructed to try to derive either pleasure from the video (by focusing on what is most enjoyable and fun) or meaning from the video (by focusing on what is most purposeful and valuable). A moderated mediation analysis revealed that for experts, looking for meaning (versus pleasure) in
the video led them to request to view a similar (versus different) follow-up video, an effect mediated by experts’ expectations that the watching the video would have a lasting impact (b = .62, 95% CI: .01 to 1.25). For novices, no such effect emerged. Thus it appears that expertise with consumption experiences permits the search for meaning, a search that consumers are then motivated to prolong.

We discuss the implications of these findings for understanding how and why consumers derive pleasure from unpleasant experiences, and for aiding consumers’ search for different types of happiness (cf. Mogilner, Aaker, and Kamvari 2012).

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