Sweet Or Sweat, Which Should Come First: the Sequence Effect of Justification

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Our choices are composed of a series of vices and virtues. Which sequence of having them can lead to a better experience? Given the need to justify guilt induced by the vice, we propose that only by adding a virtue after a vice can the overall experience be improved.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

People are around of vices and virtues. When we plan our meals, we constantly hesitate about whether to eat something tasty but unhealthy, like fried chips, or something healthy but tasteless, like a green salad. When we plan our schedule, we are constantly torn by whether to work or to play. Most of previous research explored what determines the choice between a vice and a virtue. In this case, choosing one option means giving up the other one. For instance, researchers find that when consumers decide which to give up, they value the vice item more than the virtue one, whereas when they choose which to acquire they value the virtue one more (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000).

Some other research offered participants a chance to have both a virtue and a vice simultaneously to explore how it is different from a single choice. Fishbach and Zhang (2008) demonstrate that when vice and virtue are presented together in one picture and seem to complement each other, the vice is preferred over the virtue; while when they are presented apart and seem compete with each other, the preference is reversed. Besides, researchers try to bundle vice and virtue together to examine consumer’s preference. They suggest that people like the bundle with 75% virtue and 25% vice most in that the virtue part can help them justify the guilt of consuming the vice (Liu, Haws, Lamberton, Campbell, & Fitzsimons, 2015).

However, if we adopt a dynamic point of view, all these choices compose a series of vices and virtues. For instance, we may intend to go shopping online for the first one hour and then read papers after that; or vice versa. Therefore, we not only choose content of options, but also their sequence. The current research proposes that the sequence of consuming can exert great influence on consumer experiences. Existent evidence about how sequence matters includes that when the last chocolate is emphasized, it is more enjoyable and tastes better than the previously eaten chocolates (O’Brien & Ellsworth, 2012). Also, sequential evaluation of calories in a vice or a virtue can lead to different calorie estimations (Chernev, 2011).

Nevertheless, why does the sequence of consuming vice and virtue influence consumer experiences? Previous research illustrates that, inherently, it is more difficult to justify vice goods or activities compared with virtue ones. Okada (2005) shows that the vice is preferred over the virtue when either is presented separately, but the virtue is preferred over the vice when the two are presented jointly. This finding demonstrates that when people are reminded that there is a virtue, it is hard for them to justify choosing a vice. In addition, it has been confirmed that people love having fun, and they are more likely to have fun if the situation allows them to justify it. For example, Kivetz and Simonson (2002) find that after people exert effort to acquire vice goods, they feel that they have earned the right to indulge.

Based on these findings, the current research hypothesized that consuming or doing things in the sequence of vice-virtue (vice first and then virtue) leads to better experience than that in a reversed sequence. In particular, if individuals consume or do something vicious first, the guilt increases. And then if they consume or do something virtue, the subsequent virtue can help justify the guilt, which in turn leads to a better overall experience. However, if they try in a reversed sequence, the preceding virtue is not able to justify the latter vice, which in turn lowers the overall experience. Four studies were conducted to test the hypothesis as well as the underlying mechanism.

Study 1 (N=101) adopted a two-cell scenario-based between-subject design. The results showed that the willingness to pay (WTP) for the entire meal containing the same vice (e.g. cheesecake) and virtue (e.g. green salad) food was significantly higher in the vice-virtue condition than that in the virtue-vice condition (t (99) = 2.63, p = .01). Besides, WTP for the vice didn’t differ between the two conditions (t (99) = 1.24, p = .22), but WTP for the virtue was significantly higher in vice-virtue condition (t (99) = 4.00, p = .00), which means that the sequence effect of justification is mainly driven by the virtue part. These results suggest that the virtue induces greater positive value when consuming after a vice, which can help justify guilt induced by the vice part.

Study 2 (N=69) used similar materials and procedure as in study 1, with three differences. First, we introduced satisfaction and taste as different measurements of subjective experience. Second, we measured guilt. Third, we asked a different set of participants to indicate their preference of eating sequence (N=38). The last change was introduced to rule out the alternative explanation that the results were affected by eating habits. It replicated the basic effect as well as the contribution of each part (virtue vs. vice food) to the overall experience (p s < .05). In addition, having a vice then a virtue induced significantly less guilt than that in the virtue first condition (t (67) = -2.48, p = .02), which means the latter virtue can better justify the guilt induced by the preceding vice, but the magic power of virtue disappeared in the reversed sequence. Study 2 also suggested that there was no dominated preference of eating sequence (χ²(1, N = 38) = .42, p =.52).

Study 3 (N=105) adopted a 2 (sequence: vice-virtue vs. virtue-vice) × 2 (viciousness: strong vice vs. weak vice) between-subjects design. The strong vice condition is similar to study 1 and study 2, while in the weak vice condition, we adopted similar manipulation from Chernev and Gal (2010) to reduce the viciousness of the vice food. By framing the vice part into a weak vice, there should be no need to justify guilt in either sequence, which in turn eliminates the sequence effect of justification on the overall experience. The data supported our induction. It replicated the sequence effect in the strong vice condition, where participants in the vice-virtue condition indicated higher WTP for the meal than those in the vice-virtue condition (t (46) = 2.54, p = .01). While in the weak vice condition, where the vice food was no longer vicious and didn’t need to be justified anymore, there was no difference in WTP between different sequences (t (54) = .13, p = .90). In addition, such results help to rule out the alternative explanation that it is the recency effect of the virtue that enhances the subsequent measured experience. If so, in the weak vice condition, WTP won’t be similar between reversed sequences.

Study 4 (N=313) employed similar design as study 3 but generalized the situation to daily activities. Participants were asked to imagine that a student was required to complete an urgent homework, which means study is a virtuous activity. Given time was limited, any other activities can undermine goal fulfillment of completing the urgent homework, which meets the definition of vices. In such a case, workout can be a vicious activity. We framed workout...
as either a strong vice by emphasizing its hedonic value, or a weak vice by emphasizing its utilitarian function. The measurement of the overall experience in this study was how much the person suffered after workout and study (reverse coded). The results suggested that if workout was framed as a strong vice, participants predicted that the student who went to gym first suffered less, compared to the students who did homework first ($t(154) = -2.57, p = .01$). However, if workout was framed as a weak vice, then there was no sequence effect of justification ($t(155) = 1.29, p = .20$).

Our research suggests that if individuals have to or want to have both vice and virtue, they should have the virtue after the vice. Such a specific sequence can better justify their guilt and in turn improve their experience.

REFERENCES


