Curiosity and Want/Should Conflicts

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We show that curiosity can be used to influence people’s choices, by steering them away from tempting “want” options and toward less-than-tempting, though normatively desirable “should” options. We also offer a new perspective on nudging, by demonstrating that when a “want” is nudged, more participants will choose a “should.”

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1023740/volumes/v45/NA-45

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Advances in Consumer Research
Volume 45, ©2017

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

News and entertainment websites often increase online traffic by tantalizing readers with sensational headlines containing phrases such as: YOU WON’T BELIEVE WHAT HAPPENED NEXT, or YOU’LL BE SHOCKED WHEN YOU SEE THIS, or 17 SECRETS YOU DON’T WANT TO KNOW. Called clickbait, these headlines typically aim to exploit consumers’ curiosity, by providing just enough information to make readers curious, but not enough to satisfy their curiosity without clicking through to the linked content. In a similar vein, many television episodes end on a cliffhanger – a plot device featuring a precarious dilemma or shocking revelation at the end of an episode – which spurs the audience to watch the next episode in order to find out how the story will continue.

This type of pursuit describes reconciling an information gap, or more precisely, what we call satisfying a curiosity appeal, which we define as a proviso that contains a promise to satisfy one’s piqued curiosity provided one option is chosen over others. In the current research we leverage the motivational benefits of curiosity appeals to test interventions designed to help steer people away from tempting “want” options like choosing unhealthy foods, choosing smaller-sooner payouts, watching lowbrow films, taking the elevator, and toward less-than-tempting, though normatively desirable “should” options. In all, our interventions leverage curiosity by luring people with the information that satisfies a curiosity appeal. To illustrate, imagine having the solution to a puzzling trivia question revealed to you if you choose to take the stairs rather than take the elevator. By promising satisfaction to the curiosity appeal (caused by the trivia question) with choosing the “should” option (taking the stairs), we propose the “should” option is more likely to be chosen than when there is no curiosity appeal (and corresponding motivation to satisfy it).

Our approach to motivating consumers via curiosity appeals implies that curiosity appeals could be used to motivate consumers to choose all kinds of options, besides solely “should” options. However, we also show that when curiosity appeals are misapplied to “want” options, consumers will counter-intuitively choose “want” options with less (not more) likelihood. At first glance, it might seem like nudges (and curiosity appeals in particular) would hypothetically operate in the same way across options – for example, in a choice between option A and B, wherein option A is nudge, it should make little difference if option A is a “should” option or a “want” option (at a minimum, the nudge ought to increase options A’s likelihood in choice regardless of whether it is a “should” or “want” option). However, we show that nudging a “want” option via a curiosity appeal is a heretofore undocumented and novel way to increasing consumers’ choice of “should” options. That is, in our research we evidence two different ways for using curiosity to change consumers’ decisions and increase their choice of “should” options: one where “should” options are nudged, and another where “want” options are nuded.

Our research is important because a large portion of marketing is about grabbing consumers’ attention, and curiosity is a feeling that activates attention (Gottlieb, Oudeyer, Lopes, and Baranes 2013). Yet, empirical research on curiosity and its relevance to marketing has been slow to keep up, with a few notable exceptions such as Isikman, MacInnis, Ülkümen, and Cavanaugh (2016) and Menon and Soman (2002). In the current research, we examine curiosity in an empirical context that explores decision making and the want/should conflict in consumers’ decisions, with an emphasis on how to reconcile the conflict in a way that steers consumers toward more choice of “should” options.

Want/Should Conflicts

People regularly face a tension between what they want to do and what they believe they should do. Researchers have long studied the conflict between choosing options that provide immediate gratification and options that are less desirable in the short-term, but provide more long-term benefits (e.g., Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, and Tice 1998; Bazerman, Tenbrunsel, and Wade-Benzioni 1998; Haws 2016). Bazerman et al. (1998) dubbed this common struggle the “want/should conflict” whereby people face two competing options.

A common thread across past research is that making “should” choices is an effortful decision, requiring individuals to both override immediately rewarding temptations and to enact willpower (Milkman, Rogers, and Bazerman 2008). Accordingly, much of the literature to date has focused on how to increase consumers’ willpower. For example, increasing individuals’ self-control capacities and cognitive resources are well-studied psychological tools that enhance the ability to make “should” choices (e.g., Baumeister et al. 1998; Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999). However, another approach is to decrease the level of temptation evoked by “want” options (Hoch and Lowenstein 1991). For instance, providing individuals with some sense of immediate gratification (that is separate from what the “want” option itself provides) can reduce the immediate desire for a “want” option in favor of a “should” option. In one empirical demonstration, Urminsky and Kivetz (2011) provided people with an immediate financial bonus in an intertemporal choice between a smaller-sooner option and a larger-later option. The authors found that the bonus led people to prefer the larger-later option because receiving it provided a sense of immediate gratification, thus making it easier to choose the less tempting but higher valued “should” option. In the current research, we explore whether appealing to a positive, intrinsically motivating state (curiosity) that requires no financial incentives could similarly steer people toward more “should” options.

Curiosity

Research has found that curiosity is a powerful predictor of behavior, playing an important role in motivating learning, mastery, and facilitating scientific discovery (Koestler 1964). Curiosity involves positive feelings of interest, but also feelings of uncertainty due to a perceived lack of knowledge (Litman and Jimerson 2004). An important theory of curiosity suggests that curiosity signals the presence of an “information gap” – that is, a lack of desired experience or knowledge (Loewenstein 1994; see also Litman 2005; Menon and Soman 2002). This feeling of deprivation instills a motivation to seek out the missing information in order to reduce or eliminate the feeling of deprivation (Maner and Gerend 2007), even if the missing information is unpleasant (Kruger and Evans 2009) or causes people physical pain when they try to resolve their curiosity (Hsee and Ruan 2016). Despite this feeling, curiosity is not typically seen as an aversive state; on the contrary, curiosity has been found to mitigate a negative experience, by improving upon it (Isikman et al. 2016); and Loew-
enstein (1994) remarks that people like to make themselves curious precisely to satisfy their curiosity. Indeed, positive feelings such as novelty, surprise, and closure help define curiosity: a desire to know something (Gottlieb et al 2013).

Drawing on research supporting the motivational power of curiosity, we tested a previously unexplored strategy for steering behavior by creating interventions that encourage less-than-tempting but nonetheless normatively desirable behaviors (“shoulds”). Our central prediction was that, in a choice between “want” and “should” options, a curiosity appeal that can be satisfied by selecting a “should” option will increase the choice of “should” options over “want” options. From a theoretical standpoint, it is noteworthy that no research has yet investigated how curiosity and temptation jointly influence consumer behavior; nor has research investigated whether receiving satisfaction to one’s curiosity will change, much less reverse one’s choices or preferences. To be sure, research has found that curiosity-inducing advertising has the effect of making consumers search for information (Krugman 1965); and that consumers tend to remember a curiosity-inducing brand better (Menon and Soman 2002) — but no research has looked at the effect of curiosity on making an actual choice, precisely one of the major aims of consumer behavior research.

**Nudging “Wants”**

Implied by our research, curiosity appeals can be used to nudge consumers to choose other options, besides solely “should” options. For instance, curiosity appeals (and nudges writ large) could conceivably be used to nudge consumers to choose “want” options. Despite the voluminous research on nudges, the notion that they can misused to increase “want” options among consumers has not been investigated. However, we propose that when “wants” are nudge (via curiosity appeals), consumers will counter-intuitively prefer them less.

Prior research has shown that before consumers choose “want” options, they prefer to feel like they have earned the right to choose them (Kivetz and Simonson 2002). This is because consumers often feel guilty and uneasy when choosing “want” options (Kivetz and Simonson 2002; Mishra and Mishra 2011; Ramanathan and Williams 2007). As such, consumers feel like they require a reason (some justification) for choosing “want” options (Okada 2005). In support of this view, research has shown that bolstering one’s self-concept or bolstering one’s effort serve as guilt-reducing ways that help make “want” options more justifiable (Khan and Dhar 2007; Kivetz and Simonson 2002). In fact, quite often with compensatory decision making, the path to justifying and choosing “want” options tends to involve first choosing “should” options — as though consuming “should” options provides consumers with the feeling that they have earned the license to subsequently indulge and choose “want” options (Merritt, Effron, and Monin 2010).

Thus, when consumers have established that they have earned the right to indulge, they feel like they have leeway for choosing a “want” option. Nudges, however, are designed precisely to help consumers make decisions without having to invoke extensive effort (Thaler and Sunstein 2009). And without the feeling of spending effort, consumers may not feel like they have adequately earned the right to indulge. What is more, satisfying one’s curiosity evokes an overall positive feeling — it serves as a reward in itself (Loewenstein, 1994). When this feeling of reward is coupled with choosing a “want” option, people may feel like they are, in the moment, over-indulging if they choose a “want” option. As the literatures on balancing and hedonic editing show, consumers prefer to balance their indulgence, by eschewing too much indulgence (Dhar and Simonson 1999). Thus, while choosing a “should” and being rewarded with the satisfaction of one’s curiosity feels like a balanced choice, choosing a “want” and being rewarded with the satisfaction of one’s curiosity feels like an overindulgence, and is consequently avoided.

**Studies**

In study 1, we gave participants a choice between two fortune cookies: one plain and one dipped in chocolate and covered in sprinkles. Half the participants were given no additional information — and this control group chose the cookies with a 20-80 split in favor of the chocolate-dipped cookie. The other half comprised our treatment condition. We told participants in this group that the plain cookie contained a fortune that would tell them something personal that we knew about them. This undoubtedly piqued their curiosity, and we observed a near complete reversal of preferences.

In study 2, we examined the special case that describes nudging a “want” option with a curiosity appeal. Thus, study 2 has three conditions — the same two conditions from study 1, plus a condition where a “want” option is nudged via a curiosity appeal. We found that in an intertemporal choice, over 80% of participants in the control condition chose the smaller-sooner “want” option. Yet when we tied participants’ choices to piquing their curiosity (with revealing the answers to a self-assessment quiz that participants took), the proportion of participants choosing the “want” option dropped significantly, in both instances. These two separate paths to increasing participants’ choice of “should” options provide evidence that curiosity appeals do more than simply incentivize participants into choosing one option over another, because we found that when “wants” are nudged with curiosity appeals, participants are disincentivized by the promise of curiosity relief.

In study 3, we investigated the different processes that underlie why people choose a “should” when it is nudged, and why people also choose a “should” when a “want” is nudged. To do this, we measured participants’ dispositional curiosity, and we measured participants’ unease, guilt, and overindulgence with choosing a nudged “want” option. We found that participants were more likely to choose a highbrow (“should”) film clip over a lowbrow (“want”) film clip when we piqued their curiosity (with a magic trick) and promised to satisfy their curiosity (revealing the secret behind the trick) provided they choose the highbrow film. This tendency was stronger among participants with higher dispositional curiosity (while holding constant other feelings such as fun, novelty, and attention). In a separate bootstrapping analysis, we found that when the “want” film clip is nudged, it makes people feel guilty choosing it, hence they prefer the alternative “should” film clip. For results to both tests (importantly, we did not find evidence supporting the possibility that psychological reactance is driving the effects).

Then, in studies 4 and 5 we broadened the scope and ecological validity of our investigation by moving to the field. In study 4, in a building on a large university campus, we designed a placard with an unanswered trivia question that we placed by the elevators. Then in a nearby stairwell, we placed different placcards with the answers to the question (thus satisfying their curiosity). We changed the questions and corresponding answers every day, and ran our experiment for 28 days. The first 14 days made up our pretest phase. In this phase, we measured foot traffic (with a SenSource people-counting laser) in the intervention stairwell without our placcards. In addition, we measured foot traffic in a separate stairwell on the other side of the building (our so-called control stairwell). The test revealed a significa nt interaction, such that the number of counts in the intervention stairwell during the posttest significantly exceeded the number of
counts during the pretest phase, whereas the number of counts in the control stairwell during the posttest and pretest phases was not significantly different.

In Study 5 we partnered with a locally-owned grocery store and tested whether curiosity gaps can motivate people to buy more fruits and vegetables. For each of the produce items (e.g., beets) we created a placard with a joke on it (e.g., “why did the beets blush?”) and posted the placard by the produce item’s regular sign that contained its details like price and origin. Then, close to the placard, we placed a cup containing bag closures with the respective punchline printed on them (e.g., “because the beets saw the salad dressing”). The placard indicated the punchline is on the nearby bag closures. In all, we had 17081 cases, and we found a significant 10% increase in fruits and vegetables purchases when our curiosity intervention was imposed.

In sum, our research demonstrates a new phenomenon in want/should conflict that goes beyond making “should” options easier to choose. Although we found that nudging “shoulds” increases the extent that they are chosen, we also found that nudging “wants” increases the extent that “should” options (rather than “want” options) are chosen. Taken together, our research shows that the powerful effects of curiosity come at a small cost and help promote a wide range of desirable behaviors, from choosing high-brow films to exercising more to healthier eating.

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