Behavioral Disinhibition: a Unitary Framework to Account For Self-Licensing and Consistency Effects in Goal Accessibility and Consumer Choice

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We show that behavioral disinhibition drives both self-licensing and its antipode, consistency, in judgment and choice. Three studies demonstrate that disinhibition predicted reward-seeking, affected the salience of an enjoyment vs. health goal, and predicted licensing vs. consistency following exposure to a healthy option.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The concept of licensing—the tendency to select an effortless, or indulging option after considering or choosing a healthy, effortful, sustainable, or responsible option—has seen a surge of research interest in consumer behavior. Strikingly, research on its opposing pendant, consistency—the subsequent tendency to select a similarly healthy or sustainable option after considering or choosing an initial healthy or sustainable option—has not kept pace and is surprisingly scarce in our field. Moreover, there is—to our knowledge—as yet no unitary explanatory framework that can simultaneously account for both consumer licensing and consistency effects. The present research aims to take a first step to fill that void. By examining the role of one underlying psychological construct and framework that may account for both licensing and consistency in judgment and choice, and can shed light on the underlying processes driving those effects—behavioral disinhibition (Carver and White 1994; Fennis et al. 2015; Hirsch et al. 2011). In three studies, we examined how (chronic) differences in such disinhibition affect reward sensitivity, accessibility of health vs. enjoyment-related goals and the actual display of licensing vs. consistency in choice following consideration of a healthy food option.

We build on the dual goal activation notion recently forwarded in health research to understand dieting behavior (Stroebe et al. 2013). More in particular, this research has shown that exposure to tempting, palatable foods, may trigger not one, but two distinct, sometimes conflicting goals, i.e., an enjoyment and a health goal. The inherent incompatibility between both goals will induce a “tug-of-war” between the two, resulting in shielding of the goal that will remain active, at the expense of the subordinated goal that becomes inactive (Stroebe et al. 2013). Extending this research, we propose that, similar to palatable foods, exposure to healthy food items may similarly activate both a health goal and/or an enjoyment goal. In addition, the goal that “wins” the resulting “tug-of-war” between the two incompatible goals, will not only remain salient but will also directly determine the downstream consequences of such activation—licensing when the enjoyment goal remains active, consistency when the health goal dominates.

Moreover, we propose behavioral disinhibition (Hirsch et al. 2011)—an unrestrained, approach-oriented, reward-sensitive state, associated with lower levels of impulse control—as a key construct that will determine which type of goal will remain active and consequently, when the ensuing downstream behavioral consequence will be licensing or consistency. We hypothesize that higher (lower) disinhibition levels will increase accessibility of an enjoyment (health) goal, which will consequently foster licensing (consistency) in consumer choice.

In a series of three studies we tested our hypotheses. Study 1 focused on a core premise underlying our reasoning: the notion that behavioral disinhibition would spur an increased tendency for unrestrained, appetitive behavior, i.e., a tendency for immediate reward seeking. Study 2 built on these results and examined the extent to which the type of goal activation following exposure to a health-related food cue is a function of individual differences in behavioral disinhibition and so tests the notion that for consumers high in behavioral disinhibition, the accessibility of an enjoyment goal will increase, while for consumers low in disinhibition, exposure to the same food cue will increase the accessibility of a health goal. Finally, extending Study 1 and Study 2, the third study directly tests the notion that behavioral disinhibition drives both licensing and consistency following exposure to a health-related food cue in a consumer choice setting. Study 1 used a correlational design where participants engaged in a reward-seeking task (the Balloon Analogue Risk Task, BART, Lejuez et al. 2002) and we measured individual differences in behavioral disinhibition using the seven items capturing behavioral inhibition from the measure developed by Carver and White (1994).

Studies 2 and 3 used a largely similar experimental design with exposure to a healthy vs. neutral food cue as a between-subjects factor and chronic differences in behavioral disinhibition as a measured individual difference variable. Study 2 measured accessibility of a health vs. enjoyment-related goal (using a word-stem completion task, cf. Bargh et al. 1996), while Study 3 assessed actual consumer choice of indulging products following exposure to the type of food item as key dependent variables.

Study 1 found evidence that higher levels of behavioral disinhibition indeed predicted increased reward sensitivity as measured by BART performance. Study 2 assessed a direct implication of this disinhibition-driven reward sensitivity for goal accessibility. This study showed that exposure to a healthy food option is indeed capable of activating not only a health, but also an enjoyment goal and demonstrated that the accessibility of the enjoyment goal was indeed more pronounced for consumers high, as opposed to low in behavioral disinhibition, while the accessibility of the health goal proved to be more pronounced for consumers low, as opposed to high in disinhibition. Finally, extending Study 1 and Study 2, the third study directly tested the notion that behavioral disinhibition drives both licensing and consistency following exposure to a health-related food cue in a consumer choice setting. This study showed that exposure to the same health-related food cue promoted increased indulgence, a licensing effect, when behavioral disinhibition was high and its opposite, health-related decision making—a consistency effect—when disinhibition was low.

Together, the present studies extend earlier findings on licensing and consistency effects, and provide a more integrative account of their occurrence. In so doing, we bridge the gap between the—sometimes separate and conflicting—findings on such effects in fields such as moral reasoning, health behavior and consumer behavior.

REFERENCES

