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## **Special Memories Require Special Protection**

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We expand understanding of memory protection by suggesting that consumers protect special memories only from contamination by non-special cues, i.e. consumers avoid repeating special experiences under ordinary, but not special, circumstances. Additionally, we find that consumers perceive this type of contamination as a self-concept threat, which leads to this avoidance.

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# Special Memories Require Special Protection

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research has found that memories of special experiences (e.g. vacations, weddings) can be viewed as assets because of their importance for self-definition (Elster and Loewenstein 1992), and consumers often protect such memories in order to safeguard them from contamination by avoiding repetitions of the experience (Zauberman, Ratner, and Kim 2009). For example, it was found that following a special resort vacation with friends, participants did not want to return the resort for a work conference.

Our research aims to expand the memory protection literature in three specific ways. One, we suggest that consumers do not avoid all repetitions of special experiences, but only avoid *non-special* repetitions. We argue that consumers avoid repeating a special experience under ordinary, but not special circumstances (e.g. will not return to the resort for a work trip but will return for an anniversary trip). In other words, the type of interference cue (special versus non-special) moderates memory protection such that only non-special cues trigger memory protection.

Two, we explore the process underlying memory protection and find contamination of a special memory by a non-special cue is perceived as a self-concept threat, leading consumers to avoid this type of contamination. Memories of special experiences are more important for self-definition than are memories of non-special experiences, thus special memories are strongly linked to the self-concept (Belk 1988). We suggest that contaminating a special memory with a non-special cue devalues the memory (by making it seem less special), and consequently also devalues the self, by making the individual feel as though they are less special. This threat to the self-concept triggers the desire to protect the memory and results in avoidance of repeating the experience.

Third, we expand current theorizing on how memories can be contaminated by documenting that marketing communications can be perceived as non-special cues, and make the advertised brand seem less special, thereby making an individual consumer's own personal experience seem less special. This reduction in the specialness has significant negative downstream implications for brand attitudes (less special = less favorable attitudes). These are especially intriguing findings since they suggest that memory contamination and protection may be far more pervasive than originally envisioned, and also because they point to a specialness-contamination tradeoff for marketers.

Study 1 was conducted with 28 participants recruited via an online sample. Participants described a special dinner they had experienced and then rated their likelihood of going back to the same restaurant for another special versus ordinary occasion and likelihood of going back with a different person if it was for a special versus ordinary occasion.

A repeated measures analysis revealed that participants were more likely to return to the restaurant when the follow-up experience was special ( $M_{\text{special}}=6.00$ ) than when it was ordinary ( $M_{\text{ordinary}}=4.82$ ;  $F(1,27)=12.49$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Further, even when going back with a different person, participants were more likely to return when the follow-up experience was special ( $M_{\text{special}}=5.29$ ) than when it was ordinary ( $M_{\text{ordinary}}=4.54$ ;  $F(1,27)=6.72$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

Study 2 utilized a 2(initial: special vs. non-special) x 2(follow-up: special versus non-special) mixed design in which the initial (follow up) experience was a between (within) subjects factor. 141

undergraduates imagined going to dinner for a special or ordinary occasion and then rated their likelihood of going back to the restaurant for another special versus ordinary dinner.

An ANOVA revealed a significant interaction between the specialness of the initial and follow-up experiences on willingness to return to the restaurant ( $F(1,139)=56.84$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Following a special experience, participants were more likely to return when the follow-up experience was special ( $M_{\text{special}}=6.52$ ) than when it was ordinary ( $M_{\text{ordinary}}=5.68$ ;  $F(1,70)=66.60$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

Study 3 utilized a 2(initial: special versus non-special) x 2(experience: special versus non-special) between-subjects design. 192 undergraduate students imagined going out to dinner for either a special or ordinary occasion and were told they had worn a new item of clothing that was described to them. Participants then imagined a follow-up scenario (special vs. non-special) at which they again wore the clothing item and then reported attitudes towards the item.

An ANOVA revealed a significant interaction between the initial and follow-up conditions ( $F(1,111)=6.71$ ;  $p=.01$ ). Following a special experience, attitudes were more positive when subsequently worn to another special event ( $M_{\text{initial\_special\_followup\_special}}=6.11$ ) than an ordinary ( $M_{\text{initial\_special\_followup\_ordinary}}=5.18$ ;  $F(1,113)=9.36$ ;  $p<.01$ ).

Study 4 used an online sample of 192 participants and utilized a 2(initial: special vs. non-special) x 2(follow-up: special vs. non-special) between-subjects design. The initial and follow-up scenarios were similar to those used in study 3. In order to explore the underlying process, participants reported perceptions of a self-concept threat after reading the follow-up scenario.

An ANOVA revealed a significant interaction between the initial condition and the follow-up condition on perceptions of self-concept threat ( $F(1,188)=4.38$ ;  $p<.05$ ) and on evaluations of the restaurant ( $F(1,188)=2.74$ ;  $p=.10$ ). Participants in the non-special follow-up condition felt more threatened ( $M_{\text{initial\_special\_followup\_nonspecial}}=4.59$ ) than those in the special follow-up condition ( $M_{\text{initial\_special\_followup\_special}}=5.15$ ;  $F(1,188)=4.16$ ;  $p<.05$ ) and evaluated Firefly more positively ( $M_{\text{initial\_special\_followup\_special}}=5.83$ ) than those in the non-special follow-up condition ( $M_{\text{initial\_special\_followup\_nonspecial}}=5.19$ ;  $F(1,188)=10.17$ ;  $p<.01$ ). Mediation analysis using the PROCESS SPSS macro (Model 7; Preacher and Hayes 2004) with specialness of the follow-up as the IV, of the initial condition as the moderator, threat as the mediator, and satisfaction as the DV provided support for moderated mediation (95% CI=.0123 to .2830).

Study 5 utilized a 2(initial: special vs. non-special) x 2(control vs. ad) between subjects design. 135 undergraduates imagined either a special or ordinary dinner, and were then either shown an ad for the restaurant before filling out the dependent measures or taken directly to the dependent measures (control condition). The main dependent measures were perceptions of how special the dinner was and evaluations of the restaurant.

An ANOVA revealed a significant interaction between the initial experience and marketing communication on specialness perceptions ( $F(1,131)=3.82$ ;  $p=.05$ ) and attitudes ( $F(1,131)=4.41$ ;  $p<.05$ ). Following a special experience, participants in the control condition perceived their experience as more special ( $M_{\text{control}}=6.28$ ) than those who had viewed an ad ( $M_{\text{ad}}=5.63$ ;  $F(1,131)=6.52$ ;  $p<.05$ ), and had more positive attitudes ( $M_{\text{control}}=6.36$ ) than those who viewed the ad ( $M_{\text{ad}}=5.74$ ;  $F(1,131)=7.49$ ;  $p<.01$ ).

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