

## Indulgence as self-reward for prior shopping restraint: A justification-based mechanism<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

This research investigates the effects of refraining from a purchase temptation at one point in time on choices made at a subsequent opportunity to purchase or consume a tempting product. Four experiments involving scenarios and real decisions demonstrate that the salience of restraint at a prior impulse buying opportunity causes consumers to reward themselves subsequently by choosing indulgence over non-indulgence. We show that indulgence is likely to increase only when prior restraint is salient and hence can be used as a justification. As expected, an index of reasons for vs. against buying mediates the relationship between prior impulse purchase decision and indulgent choice. In further support of the mechanism, we find that prior indulgence can have the same effect as prior restraint, if the prior indulgence is made justifiable. Finally, we show that prior shopping restraint can increase indulgence without a corresponding increase in self-esteem. These findings extend our understanding of self-regulation and demonstrate that everyday consumer decisions such as responses to impulse buying opportunities can have consequential downstream effects.

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Consumers often have to make a series of purchase decisions in the face of temptations. For example, consumers make multiple, sequential purchase decisions when shopping from catalogs and websites. These decisions include whether to give in to a temptation and purchase products in categories that they had not intended to, or whether to hold back and stick to the shopping list. In the world of brick-and-mortar, consumers may splurge on some books at a bookstore in a mall and then have to make a decision on what snack to eat at the food court. Despite the ubiquity of such moment-to-moment activity, extant research on purchasing behavior has concentrated on one-time brand choice and purchase quantity decisions, often in situations where purchases are intended. However, decisions made at one point in time, even if seemingly irrelevant, may carry over to influence subsequent decisions. Consumer researchers have only recently begun to

examine such sequences of decisions (Dhar, Huber, & Khan, 2007; Dholakia, Gopinath, & Bagozzi, 2005; Mukhopadhyay, Sengupta & Ramanathan, 2008). This research adds to this literature by investigating the effects of refraining from a purchase temptation on decisions to purchase or consume a different tempting product at a subsequent opportunity.

Temptations have been formally defined as “momentary allurements” that threaten a currently active goal (Fishbach, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2003). In a purchasing context, this implicates situations of impulse buying (Stern, 1962) where consumers do not have a goal of purchasing a specific product but may well have an overarching goal of wealth maintenance (Hirschman, 1990; Wärneryd, 1999). Our main hypothesis is that a salient memory of restraint in the face of such temptation sanctions consumers to reward themselves when a subsequent temptation presents itself. We review the literature and derive our hypotheses below.

### Theoretical framework

We propose that consumers who refrain from an impulse purchase at a point in time are more likely to make an indulgent

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choice at a later point in time, provided the prior shopping restraint is made salient. Moreover, we propose that this is because salience of prior restraint allows consumers to justify their indulgence (e.g., “I deserve to treat myself because I behaved so well before.”). Our conceptual framework is shown in Fig. 1.

### Hypotheses development

#### Justification and indulgence

Prior literature has validated the importance of justification on choice and has shown that people are more likely to make a choice or draw a conclusion that can be easily justified (e.g., Shafir, 1993; Shafir, Simonson, & Tversky, 1993; Tetlock and Boettger, 1989). Indeed, much research has implicated a justification mechanism as that underlying indulgence (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Kivetz & Simonson, 2002; Kivetz & Zheng, 2006). Kivetz and Simonson (2002) tested the proposition that increasing the effort required in a loyalty program made consumers more likely to choose a luxury rather than a necessity as a reward. Participants preferred a luxury reward (e.g., a massage) over a utilitarian reward (e.g., credit toward grocery purchases) of equal value when program requirements were high (vs. low) but only if the program was work-related. The authors conclude from these and other results—such as the finding that preference for luxuries is greater among consumers who are more likely to feel guilt about indulgence—that effort helps justify the guilt associated with choosing indulgences vs. necessities. The notion that the likelihood of indulgence can be increased if the guilt associated with indulgence is decreased is also found in the work of Strahilevitz and Myers (1998) who demonstrated that charity incentives are more effective in promoting luxury, rather than necessity, products. Luxury consumption is presumed to evoke guilt whereas donation to charity is likely to reduce guilt. Mick and Faure (1998) also propose a similar justification-based account for self-gifting based on the finding that participants are more willing to self-gift when they have recently experienced success and attribute this success to themselves.

Other work on windfall gains (Arkes et al., 1994) supports the notion that indulgence is instigated by the availability of a

justification cue (O’Curry 1999). O’Curry and Strahilevitz (2001) suggest that acquiring a hedonic good (a windfall gain) is likely to evoke less guilt than spending income on this good and show that hedonic options are more likely to be chosen as a lottery prize than as a purchase option. Presumably, norms concerning disposal of windfall gains provide a justification for indulgence in this context. Fishbach and Dhar (2005) provide a goal-based account for indulgence where perceptions of goal progress liberate individuals to pursue inconsistent goals. For example, perceptions of progress toward academic goals allowed people to choose to hang out with friends and anticipated progress toward a fitness goal increased likelihood of indulgence in tasty yet fatty food. Finally, Louro, Pieters, and Zeelenberg (2007) show that perceived goal progress liberates people to pursue alternative goals, but only when the focal goal is close. Again, progress towards a goal, as exemplified by shopping restraint given a goal of not spending money, can help justify subsequent deviation such as self-reward.

#### Shopping restraint

In sum, prior research has demonstrated that justifiability has a robust effect on preference and choice. This study goes further, by showing that shopping restraint itself can act as a justification to make a subsequent indulgent choice. Further, the existing literature on justification-based choice has examined choices in general, and this paper extends this literature by focusing on determinants of a specific type of choice—namely, an indulgent choice.

Most people have a goal of not spending money unnecessarily (Hirschman, 1990; Wärneryd, 1999). In an unplanned shopping situation, an impulsive decision to buy goes against this generally salient goal. In contrast, not succumbing to an impulse buying temptation can be viewed as goal progress. In such a case, as Louro et al. (2007) propose, prior shopping restraint can justify subsequent indulgence. Support for this proposition also comes from Mick and DeMoss (1990) who found that respondents who rewarded themselves with an indulgence did so because they thought they “deserved” it. In their qualitative research, consumers reported feeling “proud” and “satisfied” before the acquisition of the self-gift and reported feeling “in control.” This suggests that the act of subsequently rewarding themselves with a gift that was usually

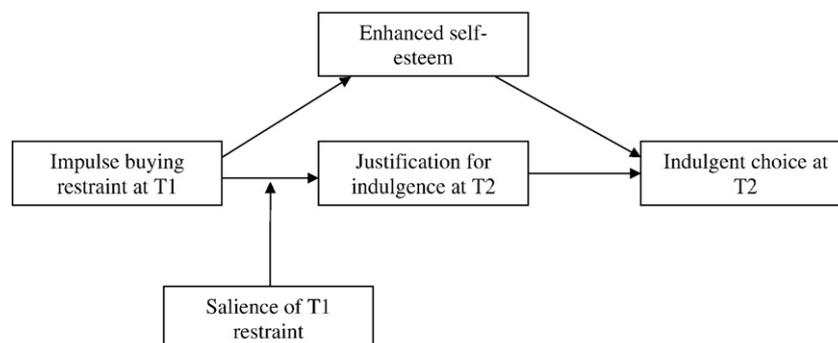


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

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