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Who needs a reason to indulge? Happiness following reason-based indulgent consumption☆

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ABSTRACT

While consumers and marketers perpetuate the lay theory that indulging with a reason is more pleasurable and makes everyone happier, this research identifies a condition under which indulging without a reason “feels right” and produces a more positive emotional reaction. The authors show that indulging with or without a reason and consumers’ trait self-control interact to influence happiness felt following an indulgent purchase. While high self-control consumers are happier when they have a reason to buy indulgent products (e.g., when they can justify the indulgence), low self-control consumers are happier when they do not have a reason to indulge. That is, indulging with a reason is less pleasurable for consumers with low self-control. This effect on happiness has an impact on downstream judgments about the product and yields important implications for consumer welfare as well as marketing managers. Across four studies we show the effect on consumption happiness, examine consequences of the effect, and report evidence for the underlying process.

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1. Introduction

Previous research and lay theory suggest that having a reason to indulge may improve consumers’ emotional experience of indulgences and mitigate the tension between pleasure and costs that is usually associated with indulging (Okada, 2005; Xu & Schwarz, 2009). Indulging with a reason refers to a rational or justified indulgence that feels like it was earned or deserved (Xu & Schwarz, 2009). For example, consumers may reward themselves for having exerted effort (e.g., saving money), for having excelled at a performance, or for having received a windfall gain (e.g., Kivetz & Zheng, 2006). The notion that indulging with a reason is better than indulging without a reason is so pervasive that marketers often provide or remind consumers of reasons to indulge. For example, Acura’s “driven by reason” campaign highlights the importance of rationalizing indulgences, and a recent Chrysler 300 ad communicated to consumers that “luxury feels better earned”. Marketing campaigns featuring a “you deserve it” message have run for decades, including for Porsche, Buick Reatta, Barclays Premier, and L’oreal. Therein, however, lies the potential for such reason-based indulgence messages to backfire if rationalizing indulgence does not resonate with the target audience (i.e., does not align with their approach to consumer spending). Thus, we examine under what conditions consumers will respond more positively (i.e., feel happier) when they have a reason to indulge. Is it possible that some consumers are happier when they

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indulge for no reason? This question addresses a decision problem that marketing managers face: to continue the widespread use of reason-based messaging in indulgent contexts, or follow an up-and-coming trend in targeting messages to consumers based on their personality traits, which might make them a better fit for a message emphasizing a reason or no reason to indulge (Back et al., 2010; LaMontagne, 2015).

Consumers often engage in indulgent consumption to increase their sense of pleasure and happiness (Okada, 2005), which for the purposes of this research we define as an immediate emotional reaction to a stimulus. For example, consumers may buy luxury products, pamper themselves at a spa, or try an expensive wine to increase their pleasure and create a positive emotional experience (Haws & Poynor, 2008; Patrick & Hagtvedt, 2009; Pozharliev, Verbeke, Van Strien, & Bagozzi, 2015). Marketers, such as Coca-Cola, with its “Open Happiness” campaign, often market their indulgent products as fulfilling happiness goals. Nevertheless, little is known about enhancing consumption happiness in the context of indulgence. The evidence is limited probably because most previous research has focused on how reasons or justifications may reduce negative feelings associated with indulgences (typically guilt and regret; Keinan, Kivetz, & Netzer, 2016; Kivetz & Simonson, 2002; Kivetz & Zheng, 2006). The work by Xu and Schwarz (2009) is a notable exception, showing that indulging with or without a reason actually does not change consumers' positive emotional experience in response to indulgences. That is, they find that consumers enjoy their indulgences equally whether they have a reason to indulge or not. Qualifying this previous finding, we propose that while some consumers are happier when they have a reason to indulge, others may actually be happier when they do *not* have a reason to indulge, compared to when they have a reason.

Our predictions are based upon research on self-regulation and theories explaining how emotions are elicited. Research on self-control suggests that consumers with low or high self-control tend to prefer hedonic consumption when it aligns with their personality traits of being spontaneous or rational, respectively (Bearden & Haws, 2012; Haws, Bearden, & Nenkov, 2012; Nenkov, Inman, & Hulland, 2008; Poynor & Haws, 2009). Taken together with research showing that positive emotions such as happiness result from particular contexts that are consistent with consumers' personal preferences and how they behave (Lazarus, 1991; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988; Ruth, Brunel, & Otnes, 2002), we propose that high and low self-control consumers may react differently to indulging with and without a reason. We predict that high self-control consumers are happier when they have a reason to indulge, and, more interestingly, low self-control consumers are happier when they do not have a reason to indulge. We also develop insights into the underlying mechanism. We propose that the effect of indulging with a reason on consumption happiness is explained by the congruency between one's personality (high or low self-control) and the purchase context (indulging with or without a reason). Self-regulation research (e.g., Aaker & Lee, 2006; Malaviya & Sternthal, 2009) suggests that consumers experience such fit as a “feels right” intuition when indulging. We find that this sense of feeling right mediates the effect.

Besides consumption happiness, we examine a few downstream consequences of the effect we uncover: satisfaction with the purchase, likelihood of returning the product, and word-of-mouth. As such, this research has important implications for consumer welfare and for marketing managers. For example, consumers' experience of immediate happiness can increase their overall well-being (e.g., Kivetz & Keinan, 2006). Happiness elevates consumers' thinking (high mental construal), helping them to see the big picture (Labroo & Patrick, 2009). Happiness that is believed to be fleeting helps consumers decide whether to consume to regulate their emotions (Labroo & Mukhopadhyay, 2009). Consumption happiness is also important for companies because they can benefit from more positive consumer judgments that are a consequence of consumers' experienced positive emotions (Chitturi, Raghunathan, & Mahajan, 2008; Kim, Park, & Schwarz, 2010; Kworntnik & Ross, 2007; Mogilner, Aaker, & Kamvar, 2012; Patrick & Hagtvedt, 2009; Pham, Geuens, & De Pelsmacker, 2013) and may benefit from long-term consequences such as loyalty (Homburg, Koschate, & Hoyer, 2006). While communication targeting based on personality variables might have been more challenging for marketers in the past, technology and innovation have made it possible to highly customize products, services and marketing communication, particularly online, based on customer online behavior data (e.g., Chung, Wedel, & Rust, 2016). It is therefore within marketers' reach to be able to target consumer groups based on their trait self-control (e.g., Hirsh, Kang, & Bodenhausen, 2012).

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. First, we develop hypotheses about the conditional effect of indulging with/without a reason on consumption happiness, sense of feeling right, and downstream consumer judgments, as a function of trait self-control. In the empirical section we present converging evidence for our predictions across four studies that examine the effect (studies 1–4), its consequences (studies 1–2), and alternative underlying mechanisms (studies 3–4). Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings to theory, consumers, and marketing practice.

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1. The effect of indulging with or without a reason on consumption happiness

Interest in the emotion of happiness has increased in the last decade because of an increasing interest in overall well-being (or happiness in life), which is perhaps people's ultimate goal (Etkin & Mogilner, 2016). Well-being is a combination of frequent experience of positive emotions such as happiness, along with a cognitive evaluation of one's satisfaction with life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffitt, 1985; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Thus, experiencing short-term consumption happiness can potentially contribute to consumers' overall well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Fredrickson, 2001).

Consumption contexts, and in particular indulgent consumption, have the ability to contribute to consumers' experience of the positive emotion of happiness (Haws & Poynor, 2008; Patrick & Hagtvedt, 2009; Pozharliev et al., 2015). However, relatively little has been done in this area in marketing despite an expressed need (Mogilner & Norton, 2015). Consumption contexts that have

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