**Role of Self-Schema Activation in Goal Pursuit via Sequential Choice**

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Researchers have shown considerable interest in the effects on self-regulatory failure on subsequent behavior over the last few decades (Carver and Scheier 1998; Devezer et al. 2014; Fishbach, Dhar and Zhang 2006). One common assumption inherent to this body of literature is that consumers can easily and unambiguously categorize certain behaviors as a failure (e.g., indulging in a chocolate cake). We argue against this assumption and propose that as people hold different values and pursue multiple goals simultaneously, whether a particular behavior will be recognized as a lapse or self-regulatory failure will depend on which value is salient in the consumer’s mind.

The symbolic self-completion theory predicts that failing toward a self-defining goal propels individuals to self-symbolizing efforts aimed at winning back a renewed sense of completeness (Brunstein and Gollwitzer 1996; Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982). However, the self-concept is known to be multifaceted, malleable and context-dependent and all dimensions of the self-concept cannot be accessible in one’s mind at a given moment. Instead, only a subset of the universe of self-conceptions is active at a time depending on situational contexts or current experiences (Wheeler, DeMarree and Petty 2007). Once activated, a particular self-schema has relative dominance over other aspects of the self-concept and creates a motivational state by serving as an ideal standard to attain. When a behavior incongruent with the active self-schema is performed, the regulatory system will identify it as a failure and the person will engage in self-symbolizing behaviors in order to reduce the discrepancy between current and ideal states (Carver and Scheier 1998).

We hypothesize that self-symbolizing will take the form of valuation of schema-congruent and devaluation of schema-incongruent means. In the absence of an active self-schema; however, the same behavior might not be indicative of increased distance from a desired end, but may imply low commitment to the goal and enhance disengagement from the pursuit (Fishbach et al. 2006). In this case, a self-perception-like process of reinforcement (Bem 1972) will dominate wherein an initial behavior activates a goal, increasing the likelihood of performing similar behaviors. If a schema-congruent behavior is performed, the discrepancy between actual and ideal selves will decrease. This perceived goal progress might reduce the regulatory tension and liberate people from further self-symbolizing efforts.

We test these predictions in two experiments using a setting of sequential food consumption where we activate either a hedonic or a healthy self-schema. The results of two experiments support our self-schema activation framework of self-regulatory failures. Overall, we show that a schema-incongruent behavior leads to enhanced self-regulation toward the focal goal whereas a schema-congruent behavior releases ongoing self-regulation. The proposed framework fits nicely with and contributes to recent developments on sequential consumer choice (Huber, Goldsmith, and Mogilner 2008) by focusing on the background values driving the direction of choice sequences. Past research has largely focused on the bottom-up effects of “temptations.” Our studies provide novel insight into the self-regulation process, by showing that hedonic values may also operate in a top-down direction when they temporarily dominate the self-concept.

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