

Making Prudent vs. Impulsive Choices: The Role of Anticipated Shame and Guilt on Consumer Self-Control

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ABSTRACT

We examine the differential effects of anticipating shame vs. guilt on choice likelihood of a hedonic product. The results demonstrate that when offered a hedonic snack (chocolate cake) consumers who anticipate shame are significantly less likely to choose to consume it compared to those who anticipate guilt. Anticipating guilt also has a more circumscribed effect, impacting choice likelihood only for those consumers who are not attitudinally inclined toward the hedonic product. The results also show that anticipating guilt versus shame has different effects on anticipated happiness after lapses in self-control.

INTRODUCTION

Maria was dismayed at how much weight she had gained. It seemed that no matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't resist indulging in high calorie desserts. Vowing to remember how bad her overeating made her feel, she put a note on the box of left-over cake from her daughter's birthday party that reads "if you eat this, you will feel bad."

Two powerful negative emotions of self-condemnation are shame and guilt. While commonsense knowledge reminds us that these emotions are reactions to self-control failures, little is known about whether *anticipating* these emotions as a consequence of consumption will impact self-control. Hence, one objective of this paper is to examine whether anticipating shame and guilt from lapses in self-control influences actual self-control. Although a limited body of literature has examined the impact of guilt on self-control, knowledge of the impact of anticipated shame is lacking. Thus, a second objective of this research is to assess whether shame and guilt exert differential effects on consumer self-control. Finally, while many consumers are beset by problems of self-regulation as evidenced by overeating, overspending, compulsive shopping, gambling, smoking and drug use, not *all* consumers experience problems with consumer self-control equally. Thus, the third and final objective of this research is to examine whether shame and guilt have a differential impact on consumers whose personality or preferences make them differentially vulnerable to self-control lapses.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Anticipated Affect and Self-Control

Recent work in psychology and marketing has begun to examine anticipated or forecasted emotions and their impact on choice. Anticipated emotions (also called affective forecasts) refer to the prediction of the emotional consequences of decision outcomes (Gilbert *et al.* 1998; MacInnis *et al.* 2005), in this case, to the affective consequences of giving in or not giving in to an impulse.

Though research on anticipated affect and self-control is limited, the little that exists is intriguing. Bagozzi *et al.* (1998) found that anticipating positive emotions (including pride, joy and satisfaction) from self-regulatory success and negative emotions (including guilt, regret and sadness) from self-regulatory failure predicted dieting intentions, plans, and dieting-related actions. Other studies have addressed the relative impact of anticipated positive emotions associated with achieving a goal (e.g., delighted,

happy, proud) versus negative emotions from not achieving a goal (e.g., guilty, regretful, sad) on impulse control (Bagozzi *et al.* 2003; Perugini and Bagozzi 2001; Giner-Sorolla 2001).

An interesting and relevant extension to this literature concerns the impact of anticipated emotions of the same valence on self-control. As Lerner and Keltner (2001) point out, little work has been done to differentiate emotions of the same valence—and this is particularly true in the context of affective forecasting. Relevant here are negative anticipated emotions presumed to arise from the failure to control impulses and consume a hedonic product. Although Bagozzi *et al.* (1998, 2001) found that anticipating negative emotions like shame and guilt can facilitate impulse control, they did not assess whether each emotion can itself impact self-control. Because both are negative emotions induced from moral transgressions, one might expect that either shame or guilt can impact self-control compared to not anticipating any emotions.

H1: Compared to consumers who do not anticipate the emotions presumed to arise from a hedonic choice, those who anticipate the (a) shame or (b) guilt from hedonic consumption will be more likely to exert self-control (and less likely to choose (consume) the hedonic product).

The Differential Impact of Shame vs. Guilt on Self-Control

Lack of understanding of the potentially differential impact of shame vs. guilt on self-control is perhaps understandable because the two emotions are sometimes used interchangeably (Tangney and Dearing 2002). This lack of distinction is likely due to the fact that both are negative self-conscious emotions of self-condemnation that result in response to a moral transgression.

Notably though, cumulative empirical studies reveal that these two emotions are distinct. Shame is evoked from a perceived transgression of the 'self' (e.g., *I am a horrible person*), whereas guilt is evoked from a perceived transgression of one's 'behavior' (e.g., *I did that horrible thing*) (Lewis 1971). Shame evokes counterfactuals of the self ("If only I weren't"), whereas guilt evokes counterfactuals for actions ("If only I hadn't" for guilt) (Niedenthal *et al.* 1994). Finally, shame induces a behavioral motivation to hide, escape, sink or disappear from others and the situation (Lewis 1971). Guilt, on the other hand, induces a behavioral motivation to restore or make amends or atone for transgressions (Wicker *et al.* 1983; Tangney *et al.* 1996).

Notably these differences between shame and guilt are with regard to an experienced emotion. We theorize that these differences between shame and guilt manifest themselves even in anticipation, differentially influencing self-control. Past research finds that shame is a more powerful and intense emotional experience than guilt (e.g., Tangney *et al.* 1996; Roseman *et al.* 1994). Shame is often associated with a stronger physiological response and is more powerful by its implication of the self as the reason for the transgression. Guilt on the other hand involves a less potent physiological response and is a result of an appraisal that implicates one's behavior in the transgression. Furthermore, while guilt evokes the possibility of atonement for one's wrongdoing, shame evokes no such potential, and indeed further implicates the self for one's weakness. Hence, we predict that anticipating the accusation of the

self is more likely to keep people from transgressing than anticipating the blame of a specific behavior. Shame may also induce more self-control by virtue of the fact that it is viewed as a more public emotion, whereas guilt has been viewed as a more private affair (i.e., reaction of one's internalized conscience to a breach of one's personal standards) (e.g., Ausubel 1955; Benedict 1946; Gehm and Scherer 1988). By virtue of its power, lack of atonement potential, and public element, we hypothesize that:

H2: Consumers who anticipate shame from consuming a hedonic product will be more likely to engage in self-control (e.g., choose to forego the consumption of a hedonic product) than will consumers who anticipate guilt from consuming the hedonic product.

Attitude toward Consuming the Hedonic Stimulus

Notably, exerting self-control may be more or less important depending on consumers' apriori predisposition to engage in hedonic choice. The same hedonic choice (e.g., eating chocolate cake) may be extremely appealing to some consumers and less appealing to others given apriori attitudes toward the hedonic product. Hence, an interesting extension to H1 and H2 concerns whether shame and guilt exert an equivalent impact on self-control for consumers with positive vs. neutral attitudes toward the hedonic product.

We predict that for consumers for who have neutral attitudes toward the hedonic product anticipating either shame or guilt will impact self-control. Because the consumption item induces limited attraction, anticipating either negative emotion should induce greater self-control than not anticipating these negative emotions.

H3: For consumers with neutral attitudes toward consuming the hedonic product, anticipating either shame or guilt from consumption will have a greater impact on self-control than will not anticipating either emotion.

However, for consumers who are most vulnerable to self-control lapses—those with a positive attitude toward consuming the hedonic product—shame may exert a greater impact on self-control than will guilt. Because attitudes are more positive, the allure of the product is greater, requiring a strong emotion like shame to induce self control. We thus hypothesize that:

H4: For consumers who have a positive attitude toward consuming a hedonic product, anticipating shame from consumption will have a greater impact on self-control than will anticipating guilt.

Anticipated Happiness from Self-Control or Lack Thereof-

Self-control in the context of hedonic choice involves a trade-off between short-term vs. long-term happiness. This notion is consistent with the idea that preferences can be time inconsistent (Hoch and Lowenstein 1991; Metcalf and Mischel 1999; Giner-Sorolla 2001). Lapses in self-control brings about short-term happiness as impulses are indulged—though longer-term consequences like shame and guilt may be subsequently experienced. On the other hand, engaging in self-control often sacrifices short-term pleasures for longer-term happiness. Delaying gratification in the present can induce a larger and bigger reward—which presumably will induce greater happiness than would succumbing to short-term gratifications.

An interesting question regarding anticipated shame and guilt is whether they evoke similar effects on anticipated happiness in the short term as a consequence of giving in to impulses and engaging

in hedonic consumption. Once consumers decide to commit themselves to indulge even after anticipating guilt associated with consumption, it is more likely that they justify their decision to consume with inflated anticipatory happiness. The fact that guilt implicates the transgression of the specific behavior also implies the motivational readiness to discount their transgression as a one-time, transient incident. As the term, guilty pleasure (Giner-Sorolla 2001), signifies, anticipating guilt, once committed to indulge, may inflate anticipated happiness about consuming the impulse-laden product as a (consequence of) post-decision justification.

On the other hand, since shame is a more intense emotion that arises from the appraisal of the transgression of the self (Lewis 1971), it is likely that one's decision to indulge cannot be easily justified. Moreover, the transgression is less easily discounted as a one-time, fleeting misbehavior since it implicates the self, tarnishing one's self-image. Therefore, we predict that consumers who anticipated shame, but still consume the hedonic product, are likely to anticipate less happiness from consumption than are consumers who anticipate guilt.

H5: Consumers who anticipate guilt from consuming a hedonic product will be more likely to anticipate happiness following hedonic consumption compared to consumers who anticipate shame.

Individual Differences in Impulsivity

Self-control is more difficult for consumers with chronic tendencies toward impulsive behavior. Consumer impulsivity has been widely regarded as an important individual difference variable in self-control (Puri 1996). The impact of shame and guilt on the effects noted above would be noteworthy if they remained robust even after controlling for individual differences in impulsivity.

EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

Method

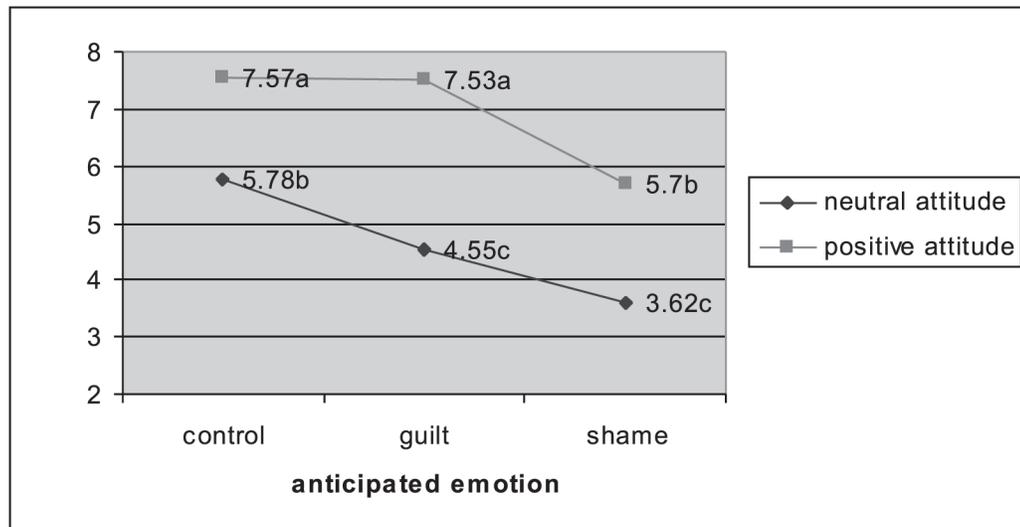
H1-H5 were examined in a 3 (anticipated emotion: shame, guilt, no emotion control) X 2 (attitude toward the hedonic product: positive vs. neutral) experiment. Ninety-one participants were randomly assigned to one of the three anticipated emotion conditions. Attitude toward the hedonic product served as a measured variable.

Respondents were shown a delicious-looking chocolate cake at the start of a computer-based questionnaire and were asked to imagine that it was placed in front of them. To manipulate anticipated emotion, respondents were then told that although they wanted to reach out and take a bite of the cake, they stopped for a moment to anticipate how guilty (vs. ashamed) eating the cake would make them feel. The control condition was not given any instructions to anticipate emotions.

Respondents then completed a set of questions designed to measure how likely they were to eat the cake (1=not at all likely; 9=very likely), their anticipated happiness from eating the cake (1=not at all; 9=very much) and manipulation checks for anticipated shame and guilt (1=not at all; 9=very much). Individual differences in attitudes toward eating chocolate cake were also measured using a 3-item 9-point scale (favorable, positive, good; Cronbach's $\alpha=.92$). The three items were averaged to yield a scale of attitude toward eating cake. A median split divided participants into positive vs. neutral attitude conditions (Median=6.33; M=7.99 for positive and M=4.38 for neutral). To control for individual differences in consumer impulsivity, a scale adapted from Puri (1996) was used as a covariate in the results presented below.

FIGURE 1

The effect of anticipated emotion and attitude toward consuming the hedonic product on choice likelihood



a,b,c Means with different superscripts are different at $p < .05$.

Results

Manipulation Check. The results confirmed that participants in the experimental conditions anticipated the emotions they were instructed to anticipate (M 's=4.58 and 4.61 for anticipated guilt and shame respectively) in the context of eating the cake.

Choice Likelihood. A 3 (anticipated emotion) X 2 (attitude) ANCOVA on the choice likelihood as the dependent variable and consumer impulsivity as a covariate revealed a significant main effect for anticipated emotion ($F(2, 84)=4.77, p < .05$) and a significant main effect for prior attitudes toward cake ($F(1, 84)=18.50, p < .001$). As expected, the main effect of attitudes showed that consumers who had positive attitudes toward eating cake were more likely to choose it (and forego impulse control; $M=6.93$) compared to consumers who had a neutral attitude toward consuming the hedonic product ($M=4.65$). The main effect for anticipated emotion showed that anticipating shame ($M=4.66$) resulted in greater self-control than anticipating either guilt ($M=6.04$) or the control condition ($M=6.68$). These results support H1a and H2.

However, we observed no support for H1b. Consumers who anticipated guilt did not show greater self-control ($M=6.04$) than consumers in the no emotion control condition ($M=6.68$).

Post-hoc contrasts showed that for consumers with neutral attitudes toward the hedonic product showed reduced choice likelihood when they anticipated guilt ($M=4.55$) or shame ($M=3.62$) compared to consumers in the no emotion control condition ($M=5.78$). These results support H3.

The results also support H4. For consumers with positive attitudes toward consuming the hedonic product, anticipating shame had a greater impact on self-control ($M=5.7$) than did anticipating guilt ($M=7.53$) or not anticipating emotion ($M=7.57$).

Collectively, these results suggest that while anticipating shame has a consistently positive effect on self-control, the anticipation of guilt impacts self-control only for consumers who have a neutral attitude toward the hedonic product and are thus less predisposed to making an impulsive choice.

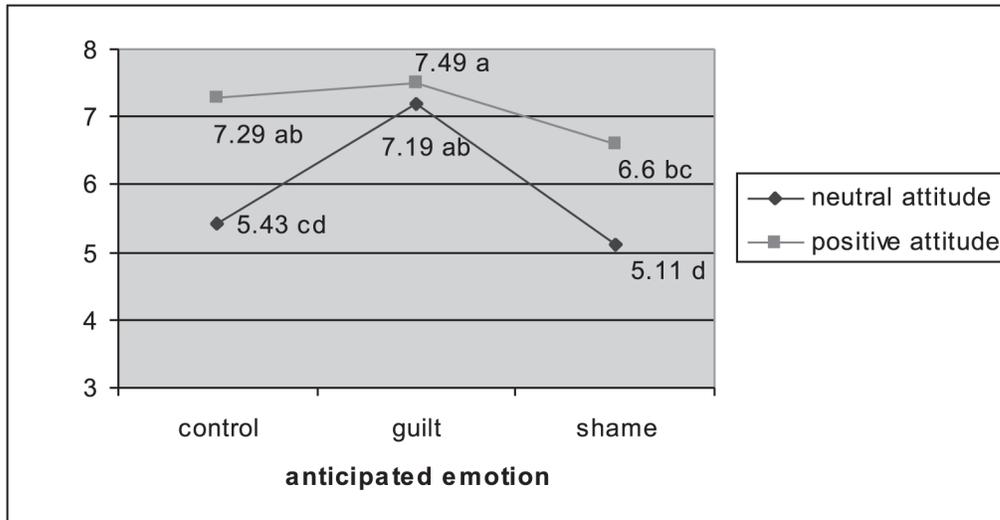
Predicted Happiness. Respondents who experienced a lapse in self-control and decided to choose the cake were asked to predict how happy they would be after eating the cake. A 3 (anticipated emotion) X 2 (attitude toward eating chocolate cake) ANCOVA with consumer impulsivity as a covariate revealed a significant main effect for anticipated emotions ($F(2, 48)=4.29, p < .05$) and a significant main effect for prior attitudes toward cake ($F(1, 84)=7.55, p < .01$). The results were replicated in a regression analysis which used a continuous measure of attitudes (vs. a median split).

The main effect of anticipated emotions showed that consumers who anticipated guilt anticipated feelings significantly happier ($M=7.34$) after consuming the cake than consumers who anticipated shame ($M=5.86$) or control consumers ($M=6.36$). These effects support H5. The main effect of prior attitudes toward cake showed that consumers who held a positive attitude toward cake ($M=7.13$) anticipated feeling happier following hedonic consumption than consumers who held a neutral attitude toward cake ($M=5.91$).

Post-hoc contrasts shown in Figure 2 revealed several interesting effects. First, consumers who anticipated guilt from consumption also anticipated greater happiness from consumption than did consumers who anticipated shame—regardless of their prior attitudes toward cake. Second, for consumers with neutral attitudes toward cake anticipating guilt led to higher anticipated happiness from consumption than did not anticipating any emotion. Third, and most interestingly, even consumers who were not favorably disposed toward the hedonic product but who anticipated guilt showed just as much anticipated happiness from consumption as those who were favorably disposed toward the product. The fact that both consumers with favorable and neutral attitudes toward cake anticipated equivalent levels of post-consumption happiness from hedonic consumption suggests a potential association between guilt and pleasure (Giner-Sorolla 2001). The results are also consistent with the recent finding that showed the association between the concepts of “unhealthy” and “tasty” operates on an implicit level (Raghunathan *et al.* 2006).

FIGURE 2

Anticipated Happiness for Consumers Who Decided to Consume the Hedonic Product



a,b,c,d Means with different superscripts are different at $p < .05$.

DISCUSSION

Although prior research suggests that anticipating the emotions that might result from consumption impacts choice of hedonic products, our results extend this research by suggesting that two negative emotions of the same valence (shame vs. guilt) have different effects on both self-control and anticipated happiness from self-control failures.

We find that compared to conditions where consumers do not anticipate emotions from choice, those who anticipate shame are significantly less likely to make a hedonic choice (and hence are significantly more likely to engage in self-control). The impact of anticipated guilt on self-control, however, appears to depend on whether consumers have positive or neutral attitudes toward the hedonic product. Anticipating guilt seems to facilitate self-control, but only for those consumers who need it least—those who have neutral attitudes toward the hedonic product. For those who are pro-attitudinally inclined toward the hedonic product, anticipating guilt has no effect on self-control.

From the standpoint of happiness from consumption, we find that for consumers who chose to engage in hedonic consumption anticipated happiness with this decision varied as a function of both anticipated shame/guilt and attitudes. Consumers felt least happy with their decision to engage in hedonic consumption when they had a neutral attitude toward the hedonic product and anticipated feeling shame. Consumers who anticipated feeling guilty anticipated they would feel just as happy as consumers who did not anticipate any negative emotions when their attitudes toward the hedonic product were positive, and anticipated feeling even happier than those who did not anticipate any negative emotions when their attitudes were neutral. Therefore, anticipating guilt does not appear to deter anticipated happiness from choice for those who chose to engage in consumption.

The results provide an opportunity to revisit the conceptual distinction between experienced and anticipated emotions. We should note that affective forecasting is distinct from experienced affect. Anticipated emotions are cognitions about how one is likely

to feel in the future. A rather constructive consequence of experienced guilt (e.g., motivation to undo the error) may exert less influence when anticipated. In the same way, shame can exert a more powerful influence when anticipated than when experienced in the context of self-control. Anticipating negative consequences of shame such as passivity and desire to escape and hide can serve as a more powerful means to regulate impulses. We weigh the emotional consequences of the events and direct our motivation and behavior in line with our affective prediction.

Interestingly, while shame is a far more intense negative emotion than guilt, anticipating future feelings of shame could potentially decrease the likelihood of experiencing future negative feelings by increasing self-control. Notably though, one wonders about the effects of anticipating shame on outcomes like depression or self-hatred when hedonic choice is rendered despite anticipated shame. In this sense, anticipating shame from consumption may make consumers more vulnerable to negative feelings and self-hatred.

Another limitation concerns the fact that we did not assess how much guilt or shame consumers in the control condition anticipated. It is possible that consumers in this condition naturally anticipated guilt (or shame). This might explain lack of difference in results between the control and the anticipated guilt conditions.

The results of our study provide several opportunities for extension. Anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1946) classifies cultures according to whether they use shame or guilt to regulate the social activities of their members. She posits that some Asian cultures are considered shame cultures whereas European and modern American cultures are considered to be guilt cultures. Future research might investigate cross-cultural differences anticipating shame vs. guilt has on self-control.

The results of our study, while intriguing, are limited by virtue of the fact that self-control was assessed in terms of self-reports of choice likelihood. A stronger test would examine whether the effects we observe here are observed in the context of actual choice. On the other hand, these results were obtained even though a

relatively non-powerful inducement—a photo of a chocolate cake (as opposed to an actual real-life temptation) was used as the stimulus (see Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999). Future research might examine the impact of anticipated shame and guilt in the context of real stimuli and actual choices. By comparing respondents' behavioral responses of the current study with those using actual stimuli, we can tell how far off people can predict the behavior as a result of anticipated shame vs. guilt. Another interesting extension concerns the long-term impact of anticipated shame vs. guilt on self-control. Prior studies showed that self-regulatory strength can in fact be “worn out” like a muscle when mental efforts are prolonged (e.g., Muraven and Baumeister 2000; Schmeichel and Baumeister 2004). Considering that shame is a more powerful and intense emotion than guilt, anticipating shame over time may wear consumer's self-regulatory resources out more easily than anticipating guilt. One wonders whether a greater self-control ability induced by anticipating shame in the short-term can be extended to the long-term. Anticipating shame may make one more vulnerable to relapse over the long term due to its intense mental efforts. The future research should examine the long-term impact of anticipated shame and guilt.

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