Do We Really Need a Reason to Indulge?

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We document consistent discrepancies between consumers’ predicted, actual, and remembered feelings related to indulgence episodes and conceptualize the underlying processes. Consistent with previous research, consumers expect more negative and less positive feelings when they indulge themselves without rather than with a reason (study 1) or as a consolation for poor performance rather than a reward for high effort (study 2). However, episodic reports pertaining to the last indulgence episode show no influence of having vs. not having a reason (study 1), nor do concurrent reports show a difference between indulging as a consolation vs. a reward (study 2). When asked how they “usually” feel when indulging with vs. without a reason (study 3), consumers’ global memories are consistent with their expectations rather than their actual experience. These findings bear on the conditions under which consumers learn from experience.

<138>
Introduction

Consumers often seek reasons to justify their decisions or choices (Shafir, Simonson, and Tversky 1993), in particular when the decision is difficult (e.g., when choosing between equally attractive options) or conflicts with their personal values (e.g., spending on luxury items instead of necessities). For example, consumers often find it hard to justify indulgences and luxury purchases. Hedonic indulgences may be construed as wasteful and are likely to evoke guilt and (anticipated) regret, both prior to decision and after the decision has been made (Kivetz and Simonson 2002; Lascu 1991; Okada 2005). Therefore, consumers are more likely to search for legitimate reasons to justify luxury purchases or indulgences than they are to justify expenditures on necessities. For example, Kivetz and Simonson (2002a, b) examined consumers’ use of bonus points in loyalty programs. They found that consumers are more likely to redeem points for hedonic rewards (e.g., a cruise or a pampering massage) than for utilitarian rewards (e.g., cash or necessities) if they had made a higher effort, presumably because higher effort offset the guilt associated with choosing luxuries over necessities. Similarly, Strahilevitz and Myers (1998) observed that donations to charities are better bundled with hedonic or frivolous products than with utilitarian or practical products as people enjoy rewarding themselves with hedonic pleasure for their altruistic behavior. Such findings suggest that consumers believe that they need a good reason to permit themselves to indulge, so as to minimize the guilt and/or regret that they experience throughout the decision-making, consumption, and post consumption evaluation phases.
Recent research suggests that some consumers find it so difficult to justify luxury and indulgence that they may suffer from insufficient indulgence and a deprivation of pleasurable experiences (Kivetz and Zen 2005; Thaler 1985). Past research also indicates that some consumers may realize that they have a tendency to overspend on necessities and underspend on luxury items and manage this tendency by precommitting to hedonic purchases (Kivetz and Simonson 2002b). For example, in Kivetz and Simonson's (2002b) experiments, consumers preferred to receive indulgence items as a reward (lottery prize) rather than cash, especially when the chance to win was small. Also, consumers prefer to choose indulgence rewards over necessities when the perceived effort is high and when they get excellent feedback on an effort task, but only when an opportunity for a monetary exchange is not suggested (Kivetz and Zen 2005). It seems that although consumers realize that they may not indulge enough, expected guilt and regret nevertheless prevent them from committing to indulgence.

However, there is no direct evidence that consumers’ expectations are correct. All of the available research is based either on consumers’ predictions or reported preferences (e.g., Khan and Dhar 2006; Kivetz and Simonson 2002b; Strahilevitz and Myers 1998) or on actual purchase behavior (e.g., Kivetz and Simonson 2002a; Kivetz and Zen 2005). What is missing, are assessments of consumers’ actual affective experiences during indulgences for which they do or do not have legitimate reasons. Such assessments are important because preferences as well as purchase decisions are based on hedonic predictions, that is, consumers’ expectations of how they would feel. As a growing number of studies indicates,
such expectations are often wrong and fail to capture people’s actual experience (e.g., Novemsky and Ratner 2003; Schwarz, Kahneman, and Xu in press; Xu and Schwarz 2006). If so, consumers’ decisions may often be suboptimal. Expecting guilt when they indulge without a good reason, consumers may deprive themselves of experiences that they may actually enjoy. Hence, the question this paper addresses is: Are consumers’ intuitions right? Do consumers actually experience more guilt and/or less enjoyment when they consume hedonic items without a good reason than with a good reason?

We conjecture that consumers enjoy their indulgences as much when they have a legitimate reason as when they do not, in contrast to what their own naïve theories would predict. Our basic premise is that when consuming hedonic goods or services, people’s attention is drawn to aspects of the consumption, like features of the goods, services, or consumption environment. In contrast, when making a decision, or when evaluating decisions after the fact, people base their judgments on the theories, beliefs, and mental representations that are most accessible in their mind, because they have no direct access to the hedonic experience of past or future consumption episodes.

Next, we review evidence that consumers’ hedonic predictions are often erroneous. Subsequently we conceptualize the sources of error within Robinson and Clore’s (2002) accessibility model of emotional self-report.

**Erroneous Predictions of Hedonic Experience**

A large body of literature indicates that consumers are not good at predicting their hedonic experiences and a number of alternative explanations have been offered to account
for this observation (for a review see Hsee and Hastie 2006). For example, Schkade and Kahneman (1998) argued that people focus on central features of the judgment object at the expense of other information. The resulting “focusing illusion” reflects this overweighting of the focal features. Gilbert and colleagues (1998) contend that people tend to neglect their adaptation ability when forecasting their emotional reactions to future events and hence overestimate the duration of their affective reactions. People may also under-weight the attributes that are not easy to articulate but important for experience (Wilson and Schooler 1991). People may also be in different states when predicting (cold) and when experiencing (hot) and therefore can’t accurately predict their experiences (Lowenstein and Schkade 1999). Hsee and colleagues propose a joint/single evaluation framework to explain errors of prediction and choice (Hsee and Zhang 2004; Hsee and Hastie 2006). More specifically, people are often in a joint evaluation mode when making predictions and are likely to compare the attributes of different alternatives. However, when they are experiencing the chosen alternative, they are usually in a single evaluation mode that does not involve a comparison. As a result, people may mispredict the impact of a given attribute on their actual experience. Finally, people may hold incorrect beliefs or naïve theories that are rarely updated about how they will feel in certain consumption situations (Kahneman and Snell 1990; Ratner, Kahn, and Kahneman 1999; Novemsky and Ratner 2003; Robison and Clore 2002).

A Conceptual Framework

These observations can be conceptualized in terms of Robinson and Clore’s (2002)
accessibility framework of emotional self-report. When people report on their current feelings, the feelings themselves are accessible, allowing for accurate reports on the basis of experiential information. But affective experiences are fleeting and not available to introspection once the feeling dissipated. Hence, past affective experiences need to be reconstructed on the basis of episodic or semantic information. When the affect report pertains to a specific recent episode, people can draw on episodic memory, retrieving specific moments and details of the recent past. Such reports can often recover the actual experience with some accuracy, as indicated by their convergence with concurrent reports (e.g., Robinson and Clore 2002; Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, and Stone 2004; Stone, Schwartz, Schwarz, Schkade, Krueger, and Kahneman 2006). In contrast, predictions of future feelings and global reports of past feelings are based on semantic knowledge. When asked how they would feel during a particular activity, people draw on their general beliefs about the activity and its attributes to arrive at a report. This process is subject to the biases reviewed above. The same information is used when people are asked how they “usually” feel during this activity, giving rise to similar biases. The actual experience does not figure prominently in global retrospective reports because the experience itself is no longer accessible to introspection and episodic reconstruction is not used to answer a global question. As a result, predictions and global reports typically show good convergence, but both frequently deviate from concurrent or episodic reports of affective experiences (see Robinson & Clore 2002, for a review; Kahneman et al. 2004, 2006; Stone et al. 2006, for examples).
The Present Research

Applied to consumers’ enjoyment of indulgence, this rationale suggests that reasons and justifications loom larger in consumers’ hedonic predictions than in consumers’ hedonic experiences. When asked to predict their hedonic enjoyment, consumers presumably draw on semantic knowledge about the to-be-evaluated act of consumption and their beliefs about the conditions under which this consumption would be enjoyed. Consumers’ actual consumption experiences, on the other hand, are likely to be determined by the experiential components of the consumption act itself and may not be systematically affected by consumers’ beliefs. Hence, we expect that the availability of good reasons and justifications enters consumers’ predictions and global retrospective reports, but plays a minor role in consumers’ experience.

Study 1 assesses consumers’ experience by asking for episodic reports of the feelings they experienced in a recent consumption situation. Our assessment method is modeled after the Day Reconstruction Method developed by Kahneman and colleagues (2004), which has been validated against experience sampling data (Kahneman et al. 2004; Stone et al. 2006). Consistent with Robinson and Clore’s (2002) accessibility model of emotional self-report, episodic reports of affective experience that pertain to a specific and recent instance can capture the actual experience with some accuracy and provide a feasible approximation to concurrent measurement, which is used in study 2.

In study 1, we compare consumers’ predictions and episodic reports of their affective experiences in consumption situations in which they indulged with a reason vs.
without a reason. We expect, and find, that consumers predict higher enjoyment when they have a reason to indulge, as observed in earlier research. However, we further expect, and find, that this prediction is not supported by differences in the actual experience, as reflected in episodic reports.

Study 2 extends this analysis by comparing situations in which consumers indulge as a reward for previous effort or indulge as a consolation for poor performance. We expect, and find, that consumers predict higher enjoyment when the indulgence serves as a reward rather than as a consolation. However, this difference in prediction is again not supported by actual differences in experience, as reflected in concurrent reports, collected during consumption.

Given these discrepancies between consumers’ hedonic predictions and actual experiences, one may wonder why consumers don’t learn from their experiences? At least part of the answer is that consumers’ global memories tend to confirm their predictions. In general, predictions and global retrospective reports converge because they draw on the same semantic information, leaving consumers with the impression that their predictions were correct all along. Study 3 addresses this hypothesis by assessing global retrospective reports of indulgence episodes. We predict, and find, that consumers’ global memories “confirm” their expectations.

**STUDY 1**

The objectives of study 1 are two-fold. First, we examine whether participants believe that consuming hedonic items without a reason is associated with less positive
and/or more negative affect (e.g., guilt and regret) than when consuming them with a reason (e.g., as a reward for hard work). We first ran a focus group to find some preliminary support. Eight undergraduate students (four males and four females) at the University of Michigan were recruited for a semi-structured focus group interview. Participants reported that they do give themselves a nice treat after a major exam or hard work, although there appear to be some gender differences in how they prefer to pamper themselves. For example, male students tend to enjoy meals at a nice restaurant and drinks at bars, whereas female students are more likely to indulge themselves with a pampering massage or deluxe ice cream or brownies. They also claimed that they rarely indulge themselves without any reasons because of financial constraint and they do associate guilt and regret with indulgence purchases. Secondly, we are interested in whether these expectations and beliefs are reflected in consumers’ actual consumption experience. We predict that consumers do not experience more negative and/or less positive affect when consuming hedonic indulgences without a reason than consuming with a reason, in contrast to what they believe and predict.

**Method**

One hundred and eighty four undergraduate students at a major Midwest university participated in this study in exchange for partial course credit. Participants assigned to the prediction-with-reason condition were first asked to imagine that they have just finished their final exams and are looking for something to reward themselves. They were asked to select one of several consumption activities presented to them (e.g., dinner at a nice
The choice items were selected based on the results from the focus group interview. They were then asked to indicate their expected affective experiences on a 7-point rating scale, imagining that they consume the item they chose (“How would you feel during this particular experience?”). Participants assigned to the prediction-without-reason condition were first instructed to imagine that they are giving themselves a treat (e.g., dinner at a nice restaurant or a spa treatment) without any reason and then to indicate their expected affective experiences. In both prediction conditions, respondents were asked, at the end of questionnaire, to indicate whether they were thinking about a particular instance while answering the questions and to describe it if they were. The collection of demographic information completed the questionnaire.

In the episodic recall conditions, participants were asked to recall the most recent time they gave themselves a nice treat (e.g., dinner at a nice restaurant or a spa treatment). They were then asked to recall the details associated with that consumption episode (e.g., when, where, who they were with, etc) and subsequently reported the feelings they experienced during the consumption episode along the same affect dimensions. Finally, these participants indicated whether there was a particular reason for that consumption and described the occasion if there was a reason. They also reported how much they spent on that indulgence and who paid for it. For comparison with the prediction conditions, participants were grouped on the basis of whether they reported that they did vs. did not have a reason to indulge.

The following 18 affect descriptors (9 positive and 9 negative) served as dependent
variables: happy, excited, pleased, fun, enjoyable, in high spirit, joyous, thrilled, and energized representing positive emotions and frustrated, depressed, disappointed, guilty, angry, worried, bored, uninterested, and annoyed representing negative emotions. Each feeling was reported on a scale from 0 = not at all to 6 = very much.

Eight respondents were deleted from analysis due to incomplete answers, leaving a usable sample of 178. Positive and negative affect indexes were computed by averaging all positive and negative items.

**Results**

*Justifications and expenditures.* Participants assigned to the episodic recall conditions indicated whether they had a reason to indulge. Consistent with the extant literature, they were more likely to indulge when they had a reason (N = 57) than when they had not (N = 34, \( \chi^2(1) = 5.81, p<.05 \)). Moreover, those who had a reason to indulge recalled that they spent more money (M = 131) than those who had no reason (M = 87, F(1, 87) =.21, p>.05), although this difference was not significant (due to big standard deviations).

*Predicted vs. recalled affect.* Past research showed that predicted affect is more extreme than experienced affect (e.g., Wirtz, Kruger, Scollon, and Diener 2003). Given that predictions are theory-driven, we expected that this discrepancy would be primarily observed for feelings that figure prominently in participants’ naïve theory about the respective type of behavior, that is, guilt in the case of indulgences. Consistent with this assumption, participants predicted a higher level of guilt under both prediction conditions.
(M = 2.43) than they recalled under episodic conditions (M = 1.65, F(1, 178) = 8.45, p< .01). Participants also reported higher enjoyment under both prediction conditions (M = 5.13) than they recalled under episodic conditions (M = 4.78, F(1, 178) = 5.42, p<.05). None of the other affect reports showed a pronounced prediction vs. episodic recall discrepancy, all F < 1.

**Expectations vs. experiences.** Next, we turn to the core issue of interest: Do consumers’ experiences match their expectations? Consistent with expectations, participants predicted that they would experience more positive (M = 4.83) and less negative (M = 0.75) feelings when there is a reason to indulge than when there is not (M’s = 4.47 and 1.31, respectively; F(1, 87) = 4.23, p<.05, for positive feelings and F(1, 87) = 11.06, p<.01 for negative feelings). Again, this difference was particularly pronounced for feelings of guilt. Specifically, participants predicted to experience less guilt when there is a reason to indulge (M = 1.07) than when there is not (M = 3.76, F(1, 87) = 81.69, p<.001). These differences in predicted feelings are consistent with the extant literature (e.g., Prelec and Loewenstein 1998; Thaler 1985).

Despite participants’ clear expectations, the presence or absence of a reason to indulge made no difference when participants recalled a specific, recent episode of indulgence. As theoretically predicted, participants’ episodic reports suggest that they did not experience more positive affect when they indulged with a reason (M = 4.42) rather than without a reason (M = 4.51, F < 1) (see Figure 1). Similarly, they did not experience more negative affect when they indulged without a reason (M = 0.71) than when they had a
reason (M = 1.01, F(1, 89) = 3.09, p > .05) (see Figure 2). Furthermore, indulging without a reason was not accompanied by more guilt (M = 1.63) than indulging with a reason (M = 1.68, F < 1) (see Figure 3). In general, participants experienced only a minimum amount of negative feelings in both episodic conditions, with a mean of 0.90 on a scale of 0 to 6.

**Discussion**

These results suggest that consumers do not experience more negative affect and/or less positive affect when indulging without a good reason than when indulging with a good reason (e.g., as a reward for hard work). This provides initial support for our argument that a lack of justification does not limit the actual enjoyment of an indulgence, in contrast to what consumers expect.

However, study 1 has several limitations. Most notably, we randomly assigned participants asked to make predictions to the reason vs. no-reason conditions. Such an assignment was not feasible in the episodic reports condition because it would have brought the respective beliefs to mind, thus increasing the likelihood that participants would draw on these accessible beliefs rather than on episodic details in reconstructing their hedonic experience. As a result, it is conceivable that participants who reported on an experience in which they indulged without a reason differ from those who had a reason for their indulgence. Most importantly, those who indulged without a reason may have enjoyed their indulgence because they don’t believe indulgence requires a reason in the first place. Study 2 does not suffer from this ambiguity.

The second limitation of study 1 is less problematic because it works against our
hypotheses. Specifically, we asked consumers to recall the most recent episode of indulging themselves. Unfortunately, forty-three percent of our participants reported that the most recent time they purchased indulgence items was more than two weeks ago, suggesting that their episodic memory of the actual experience may already have decayed. Theoretically, this works against the expected, and obtained, results because the recall of affective experiences becomes increasingly theory-driven over time, as episodic memory traces become less accessible (Robinson and Clore 2002). If anything, this shortcoming would therefore attenuate the observed discrepancies between predicted and experienced feelings. Study 2 addresses this limitation by measuring participants’ online experiences.

STUDY 2

In study 2, some participants predict how they would feel while consuming an indulgence (chocolate truffles), whereas other participants actually eat the truffles and report how they feel while eating the truffles. In addition, study 2 distinguishes between two different justifications for indulgence. Specifically, consumers may indulge to reward themselves (e.g., after they passed an exam) as well as to console themselves (e.g., after they failed an exam), as suggested by previous research into reason-based choice (Shafir et al. 1993). It seems likely that consumers take these different reasons into account when they predict their enjoyment of an indulgence. We therefore conjecture that consumers will predict higher enjoyment when the decision to indulge is justified as a reward than when it is justified as a consolation. Of key interest is again whether consumers’ actual experiences match their predictions. Consistent with study 1, we hypothesize that this is not the case and
that consumers’ actual product enjoyment will be the same, regardless of the type of reason used for justification.

**Method**

Study 2 follows a 2 (reports type: prediction vs. experience) by 2 (reason: reward vs. consolation) between subjects design. One hundred and forty seven business undergraduate students at a major Midwest university participated in this study in exchange for course credit.

Participants in the **consolation** condition worked on ten difficult GMAT math problems (selected from “Cracking the GMAT” by the Princeton Review 2004 edition) and were told that these problems are indicative of their success at a future GMAT test. We expect participants in this condition to feel bad about their performance and to seek indulgence as a consolation. We believe that business major undergraduates place high importance on doing well on GMAT, a test critical to applying to MBA programs (something that they are serious about). Participants in the **reward** condition worked on the same math problems but were told that these were very difficult problems, written for students majoring in mathematics, and were asked to give it a shot. We expect them to feel good about their performance and to seek indulgence as a reward. All participants received feedback (right or wrong) after finishing each individual problem.

Participants were then asked to choose between two items, namely two pieces of chocolate truffles or a package of toothpaste (equated for dollar value), as a token of appreciation for their participation. Participants in the **prediction** condition were asked to
imagine that they are consuming the truffles (only those who chose the truffles) and to predict their affective experience, using eighteen affect items (same as study 1). Participants in the experience condition actually received their chosen item. Those who chose to have chocolate truffles were asked to eat as much as they want and reported their affective experience while eating the truffles along the same affect scales. Participants also completed a number of additional questions, pertaining to the difficulty of the test, their performance on the test, and their feelings about the test result.

**Results**

**Performance and choice.** Consistent with previous work (Shafir et al. 1990), participants were as likely to indulge (i.e., choose the truffles) when they thought they did well in the test (i.e., reward condition) as when they thought they did poorly (i.e., consolation condition). Specifically, 82.4% of participants in the reward condition and 82.2% of participants in the consolation condition chose the chocolate truffles (t <1).

Participants who worked on the alleged GMAT problems (consolation condition) reported lower satisfaction (M_s = 2.73) and lower happiness (M_h = 2.96) with the results than those who worked on the same problems (reward condition) presented as difficult math problems (M_s = 3.3, M_h = 3.88, F(145) = 15.08, p<.0001). In addition, the two groups reported putting similar amounts of effort into solving the problems (M_c = 3.26, M_r = 3.16, NS) and both got about half of the questions right (M_c = 4.75, M_r = 4.64, NS).

In short, those who worked on so called “difficult math problems” made the same effort but felt better about their results than those who worked on the so called “GMAT
problems”. As a result, the former are more likely to seek indulgences as a reward for their hard work, whereas the latter are more likely to use indulgence to console themselves for not doing well (although they tried very hard). These results indicate that our manipulation of “reward” vs. “consolation” condition was successful.

*Expectations vs. experience.* As predicted, participants who had to predict their enjoyment expected to experience more positive (M = 4.80) and less negative (M = 1.86) affect while eating the truffles when they could be seen as a reward rather than as a consolation (M’s = 3.92 for positive and 2.45 for negative feelings, respectively; F(1, 60) = 8.6, p<.01 and 4.43, p<.05).

As in study 1, however, the predictors’ expectations were not matched by the experiences of those who actually ate the truffles. Specifically, experiencers in the reward condition reported the same level of positive (M = 4.0) and negative (M = 2.79) feelings as those in consolation condition (M’s = 4.16 for positive and 2.54 for negative feelings, respectively; both F’s <1) (see figures 4 and 5).

In sum, the findings of study 2 show that people expect to enjoy an indulgence more when it is a reward than when it is a consolation, yet their actual enjoyment does not differ across the two types of reasons. This result again supports our expectation that naïve theories figure prominently in prediction, but do not affect actual hedonic experience. These results were obtained on the basis of random assignment to all conditions, real choice and concurrent reports of participants’ momentary experience, thus eliminating the ambiguities of study 1.
STUDY 3

So far, our results indicate that consumers’ actual hedonic experiences do not match their expectations. One may therefore wonder why these expectations are maintained in light of contradictory experiential evidence? We propose that this is the case because consumers rarely draw on specific episodes to evaluate their expectations. Hedonic expectations pertain to classes of events and are likely to be evaluated on the basis of global memories pertaining to the same class, rather than on the basis of episodic memories pertaining to a specific recent instance. Global memories, however, are reconstructed on the basis of the same semantic information that serves as input into predictions (Robinson and Clore 2002). As a result, consumers’ global memories appear to “confirm” their expectations, leaving consumers with the impression that their expectations were correct all along.

To address this hypothesis, study 3 assesses global retrospective reports of how consumers felt while indulging without any reason, as a reward for an accomplishment or as a consolation for failure. We expect that global memories converge with predictions. If so, consumers may rarely see a reason to revise their expectations and beliefs, preventing them to learn from experience.

Method

One hundred and seventy six undergraduate students at a major Midwest university participated in this study in exchange for partial credit. They were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions: indulging as a reward, indulging as a consolation, and indulging without a reason. Participants assigned to the indulging-as-a-reward condition were first
asked to think back to times when they indulged themselves as a reward for hard work or achievement, and subsequently reported how they generally feel during such pampering experiences. Those assigned to the *indulging-as-a-consolation* condition were asked to think back to times when they indulged to console or comfort themselves because of some failure (e.g., doing poorly on an exam) and subsequently reported how they generally feel during such pampering experiences. Participants assigned to *indulging-without-a-reason* condition were asked to think back to times when they indulged for no particular reason and subsequently reported how they generally feel during such pampering experiences.

All participants rated their affective experience on the same affect scales used in studies 1 and 2. Participants also reported the particular instance they were thinking about when answering the earlier questions. Demographic information was collected at the end.

**Results**

*Justifications and global memories of affect.* As predicted, participants’ global memories were consistent with the predictions made by their peers in the preceding studies. Participants who were asked to think of times when they indulged to reward themselves recalled the highest positive affect (M=5.09), whereas those asked to think of times when they indulged to console themselves reported the lowest positive affect (M=3.25); those who thought of times when they indulged without a reason fell in between (M=4.60); F (2,173) = 48.86, p<.001, for the main effect. Post-hoc tests show that each group is significantly different from the other groups (p’s<.05). Similarly, participants who were asked to think of times when they indulged to reward themselves recalled the least negative affect (M=0.68),
whereas those asked to think of times when they indulged to console themselves reported the highest negative affect (M=2.19); those who thought of times when they indulged without a reason fell in between (M=1.06); F (2,173) = 40.77, p<.001, for the main effect. Post-hoc tests show that each group is significantly different from the other groups (p’s<.05) (see Figure 6).

In sum, justifications figure prominently in consumers’ global memories of indulgence experiences, apparently confirming their expectation that justifications influence how much they enjoy indulgences. Yet concurrent and retrospective episodic reports, assessed in the preceding studies, indicate that consumers’ actual experience is unaffected by justifications.

**Discussion**

Previous research showed that reasons and justifications figure prominently in consumers’ decision to indulge (e.g., Khan and Dhar 2006; Kivetz and Simonson 2002a; Kivetz and Simonson 2002b; Kivetz and Zen 2005; Okada 2005; Strahilevitz and Myers 1998). Consistent with this observation, our findings show that consumers expect to experience more negative and less positive affect when they indulge without a reason rather than with a reason (study 1) or when they indulge to console themselves rather than to reward themselves (study 2). Moreover, when asked how they “usually” feel in the respective indulgence situations (study 3), consumers’ global memories apparently confirm these expectations. These converging patterns of (i) predictions (studies 1 and 2), (ii) actual behavior (Khan and Dhar 2006; Kivetz and Simonson 2002a; Kivetz and Zen 2005), and (iii)
memories (study 3) seem to make a compelling case: If you want to indulge, you better have a good reason or else you may not enjoy it. Yet this converging evidence across predictions, behavioral decisions and memories may be less compelling than it seems. From a cognitive perspective, all of these variables are driven by the same inputs: consumers’ beliefs. These beliefs figure prominently in making hedonic predictions, which in turn serve as the basis for behavioral decisions (March 1978) and the reconstruction of global memories (Robinson and Clore 2002). To determine if consumers’ beliefs are accurate, we need to assess their actual hedonic experiences in indulgence situations. This crucial piece of data was missing from the indulgence literature and the present studies were designed to fill this gap.

Reiterating observations in other domains (e.g. Novemsky and Ratner 2003; Xu and Schwarz 2006), we observed that consumers’ actual hedonic experiences diverged from their expectations. In study 1, consumers provided retrospective episodic reports of how they felt during a recent indulgence episode. Previous research showed that such episodic reports approximate the findings of concurrent reports (Kahneman et al. 2004; Stone et al. 2006). In contrast to their expectations, consumers enjoyed their indulgences just as much when they had a reason for them than when they did not. In study 2, consumers provided concurrent reports of their feelings while indulging on chocolate truffles. Again, they enjoyed their truffles just as much when they were a reward for hard work as when they were a consolation for poor performance, in contrast to consumers’ predictions. These findings are consistent with the assumption that actual enjoyment is driven by features of the consumption act itself, which are in the focus of consumers’ attention, rather than by
consumers’ a priori beliefs.

In combination, our findings suggest that consumers’ beliefs are erroneous. Indulgence is enjoyable independent of the presence or absence of a good justification or of the reason (e.g., reward vs. consolation) used as a justification. Yet feelings and sensory pleasures are only accessible to introspection while they are experienced and need to be reconstructed on the basis of episodic or semantic information once they dissipated (Robinson and Clore 2002). When thinking about indulgence, consumers are apparently unlikely to relive recent episodes in memory and instead draw on global memories, which are based on beliefs and semantic information (Robinson and Clore 2002). As a result, their memories seem to confirm their beliefs, which impedes learning from experience.

Unfortunately, these erroneous beliefs may deprive consumers of many enjoyable experiences. At least for the relatively small and inexpensive indulgences of everyday life, like a fine dinner or chocolate truffles, the anticipated guilt and regret are unlikely to be part of the consumption experience. This may change when the indulgence involves major expenses, in which case a luxury cruise or vacation may be tainted by worries about the incurred debt.
References


