THE IMPACT OF SELF-REGULATION ON BRAND PREFERENCE

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S’appuyant sur la recherche fondamentale menée en psychologie sociale, cet article met en lumière les effets inattendus du processus de contrôle de soi sur les préférences pour marques. Une expérimentation démontre qu’un état affaibli de la ressource régulatrice conduit à un renforcement des préférences. Les conséquences marketing sont discutées.

Drawing on research from social psychology, this paper highlights the inconspicuous impact of self-regulation on brand preference. In one experiment, we establish that a state of depletion of one’s regulatory resource leads to the strengthening of one’s preferences. We further rule out the possibility that such strengthening be caused by affect manipulations. Managerial implications are discussed.
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Crucial to practitioners as firms attempt to reduce demand variability and ensure stable streams of revenues, consumer choice models have occupied much of the scholarly research in the past three decades (Bass 1974, McFadden 1986, Allenby and Rossi 1999, Seetharaman 2003). Inherent to choice is the idea of preference. Whether it be cereals, flowers, clothing designers, or a dinner’s main course, consumers tend to choose the product they prefer, that is, the one they think will maximize their utility. In this paper, we investigate the stability of preferences over time. Specifically, we draw on recent research from social psychology to articulate the relationship among temptation, self-regulation, and preference strength. We start this paper by swiftly clarifying the self-control process and then move on to the experimental design of our study.

Three factors intervene in the self-control process. The first, goals, refers to the standards, ideals, norms and other guidelines that one holds for himself. Examples of goals include an ideal weight, a shopping list, a desired emotional state (e.g., happiness), or achieving a certain performance. Along the absence of goals, conflict among goals can also undermine self-control. In several experiments, Tice, Bratslavski, and Baumeister (2001) have established that when participants are induced in a state of negative emotions, the short term goal of feeling better takes precedence over long term goals such as saving money.

The second factor, monitoring, refers to the process of keeping track of one’s own behavior. In a series of experiments where participants were asked to taste-test candies, Polivy et al. (1986) demonstrated how self-monitoring (or lack of thereof) led to lesser (greater) candy consumption. Other examples of monitoring failure can be found in the addiction literature where alcohol has been shown to reduce attention to the self (Hull 1981), thereby increasing the likelihood of self-control failure (Carver and Scheier 1981, 1982).

The last factor in the triad, willpower, refers to the capacity to alter one’s own behavior. Indeed, knowing precisely what we want (i.e., factor #1) and monitoring our behavior (i.e., factor #2) may not be sufficient to self-control. When confronted to a choice situation featuring one response option promising in the short term but conflicting with long term goals and another response option less tempting in the short term but in line with long term goals, for the individual to choose the righteous option, the self must produce an amount of energy powerful enough to surpass the strength of the impulse generated by the tempting option.

Empirical approach

The research question we tackle thereafter is that of the impact of self-regulation on preferences. Willpower theory (Baumeister, Heatherton, and Tice 1994) posits that, as one uses his regulatory resource (e.g., to make decisions or resist temptation), less energy remains available for subsequent activities. Since this source of energy is limited, yet so essential to our daily activities, we conjecture that humans attempt to spare it as much as possible. Therefore, we predict that depletion of regulatory resource should contribute to the strengthening of consumers’ preferences. Indeed, we believe that preferences can be used by consumers strategically, though not necessarily consciously, as a way to economize their self-regulatory resource. Doing so would enable them to cope with day-to-day tasks (e.g., grocery shopping) without further depleting their finite inner strength.
Participants and procedure. A total of 96 undergraduate students from a large American university participated voluntarily in a one-hour research session as part of a course requirement. The procedure follows a two-group design and was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 took place at the beginning of the semester when we asked participants to complete a preference survey featuring ten product categories (e.g., automakers, television networks, cola brands, etc). Each category was composed of four brands. Students were to select which brand in the set of four they prefer. In addition, participants indicated on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very) how strong their preference for their favorite option was over the next best one. Phase 2 took place at the end of the semester. Participants were invited back to the laboratory to participate in yet another hour long research session in exchange for course credit.

Phase 2 manipulation. Upon arrival to the laboratory, participants were randomly assigned to either one of two conditions (i.e., control vs. depletion) and invited to a room where snacks (e.g., a granny smith apple and cream pie cookie) had been displayed on the table. Students were instructed not to touch the snacks as they were part of a study coming later in the session. To manipulate the state of depletion of our subjects, we used duration of exposure to the snacks. Indeed, because resisting temptation (i.e., eating the snacks) depletes one’s regulatory resource, we gave control (depletion) participants five (fifteen) minutes of filler tasks before allowing them to complete a version of our preference survey similar to the one they had completed months earlier (i.e., in phase 1). Upon completion of the survey, participants filled out Watson, Clark, and Tellegen’s (1988) PANAS scales.

Dependent variables. We hypothesized that a state of depletion of the regulatory resource would lead to preference strengthening while a normal (i.e., control) state would leave preferences unchanged. To test our prediction, we subtracted our measure of preference strength in phase 2 from that of phase 1. As an additional measure, we computed the number of preference matches between the two phases. This number were to range from 0 (i.e., no match at all) to 10 (i.e., perfect match on all ten product categories).

Results. Results for our secondary measure were not significant: Participants in both conditions exhibited the same number of matches ($M_{\text{control}} = 8.3$ vs. $M_{\text{depletion}} = 8.3$; $F(1, 94) < 1$, NS). An ANOVA on our primary measure, however, validated our prediction: Unlike control participants, depleted participants experienced a strengthening of their preferences ($M_{\text{control}} = .0$ vs. $M_{\text{depletion}} = .8$; $F(1, 94) > 7$, $p < .01$). An alternative explanation for these results might be that depleted participants became upset and irritable because of their longer waiting before being allowed to get to the snacks. Their state of irritability, rather than their state of depletion, may thus have caused their preference strengthening. Yet, results from the PANAS scales rule out such alternative explanation. Indeed, participants of both conditions exhibited the same levels of positive affect ($M_{\text{control}} = 24.2$ vs. $M_{\text{depletion}} = 25.8$; $F(1, 94) < 1$, NS) and negative affect ($M_{\text{control}} = 15.2$ vs. $M_{\text{depletion}} = 13.6$; $F(1, 94) < 1$, NS).

Discussion

Drawing from recent findings in social psychology, we derived new insights for research on consumer behavior and decision making. Using an experimental paradigm manipulating one’s state of regulatory resource, we established that, while depletion of regulatory resource does not lead to greater brand choice consistency (i.e., more matches), it does lead consumers to strengthen their preferences for their favorite brands.

Managerial implications. Brands and retailers are the ones with most to gain from our findings. Indeed, since self-regulatory resource is limited, yet central to most daily
activities, it follows that consumers tend to be far more depleted later in the day than in the morning hours. One direct takeaway from this research would be for retailers to promote utilitarian & righteous products before 4pm, when shoppers still have enough resource available to fight temptation and persuasive attempts. Promotion for hedonic & indulgent products, on the other hand, should take place later when shoppers are more likely to succumb temptation and preference strength is heightened. Point of purchase promotion may include live speakers interacting with the shopping crowd, or automated coupon-release systems. Such systems would be programmed to release instant rebates promoting righteous products during the day and indulging products at night, thereby exploiting the natural depletion pattern of consumers.

Future research. Self-regulation is a critical factor of daily life. Whether it be coping with stress, dealing with co-workers, or simply driving, the self is constantly required to focus one’s thoughts and emotions toward making decisions, solving problems and pursuing goals. Research by Tangney and Baumeister (2001) suggests that self-control can be a stable trait of personality. Given the relationship between self-control and preferences our findings highlight, the interplay of such trait with the preference formation process offers promising avenues of research.
References