

You Don't Blow Your Diet on Twinkies: Choice Processes When Choice Options Conflict with Incidental Goals

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ABSTRACT Consumers often have multiple goals that are active simultaneously and make choices to satisfy those goals. However, no work to date has studied how people choose when all available options serve a goal (e.g., a choice-set goal) that conflicts with another goal they hold (e.g., an incidental goal). We demonstrate that in such contexts, consumers are more likely to choose the option that is most instrumental for attaining the choice-set goal, even when that option poses the greatest violation of the incidental goal. This occurs because the experience of goal conflict increases consumers' need to justify their choices. Since the consumer will violate their incidental goal by choosing any of the available alternatives, we propose that the most justifiable reason for violating the incidental goal would be to maximize on the choice-set goal. Six experiments provide evidence for these effects and the underlying theoretical mechanism.

Imagine two women who go to a spa for a short getaway. At the end of dinner on their first night, a choice between two indulgent desserts accompanies their meal: a decadent chocolate cake or a scoop of ice cream. The goal of the getaway for one woman is to relax, whereas the goal for the other is to lose weight. Both goals are incidental to their current dessert choice—they would be active regardless of whether the women were offered dessert. While the relaxation goal conflicts with neither dessert option, the weight-loss goal conflicts with both. Will the two women's decisions converge, or will they end up choosing different desserts? Although past research has examined how consumers decide when they have multiple active goals (e.g., Fishbach and Dhar 2007; Huber, Goldsmith, and Mogilner 2008; Köpetz et al. 2011), relatively little is known about the interplay between consumers' goals and choice processes in situations like these where all available choice alternatives conflict with an incidental goal they hold.

This article explores how consumers decide when faced with a choice in which all of the alternatives conflict with an incidental goal, such that choosing any of the available

options would mean violating the incidental goal. An incidental goal is defined as a goal that is active due to factors unrelated to the choice the consumer faces; it may be a chronic or long-term goal (e.g., the weight-loss goal in the example above), or it may be a goal that is activated by factors in the environment (e.g., a consumer notices a magazine about healthy eating; Fishbach, Friedman, and Kruglanski 2003). Extensive research on goals and choice has found that consumers are motivated to choose options that serve their active goals (e.g., Markman and Brendl 2000). However, past research has not explored how consumers choose in situations like our opening spa example, in which choosing any of the alternatives would mean actively violating that goal.

In such scenarios, although all of the available choice alternatives conflict with the consumer's incidental goal, they still serve a goal, which we term the *choice-set goal*. We define the choice-set goal as the primary goal served by the alternatives comprising the choice set. For example, the choice-set goal when choosing among desserts, as in our scenario above, would be indulgence, since consumers primarily eat

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dessert in order to indulge (an assumption we will support with pretest data for all stimuli). Note that we do not make any claims about the relative importance or specificity of the incidental goal versus the choice-set goal in this work.

Drawing from research on goal systems and behavioral decision theory, we posit that when all available options serve a goal (i.e., the choice-set goal) that conflicts with an incidental goal that a consumer holds, the consumer will be more likely to choose the option that is most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal, even when that option presents the greatest violation of the incidental goal. Therefore, in our opening example, we would predict that the person who holds the conflicting incidental goal related to weight loss (vs. relaxation) will be more likely to choose the more indulgent chocolate cake for dessert (vs. a scoop of ice cream), since indulgence is the primary choice-set goal when choosing among desserts.

We propose that this occurs because consumers experience conflict due to the opposing behavioral implications of their incidental goal (e.g., engage in healthy actions) and the choice-set goal (e.g., indulge), which increases their need to justify their choice. Importantly, although the available choice options are similar in that they all conflict with the incidental goal, they vary in their perceived instrumentality (or ability to satisfy) the choice-set goal (Kruglanski et al. 2015). We posit that if consumers cannot satisfy their incidental goal and, in fact, will violate it by making any choice, the option that is most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal will be the easiest to justify choosing, since it allows the consumer to maximize on one of the two goals. Consistent with this mechanism, we show that prompting consumers to justify their choices increases choice of the alternative that is most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal. In addition, we identify boundary conditions to this finding which show that the incidental goal and choice-set goal must have opposing behavioral implications, such that pursuing one goal would negatively affect the other goal. In particular, we demonstrate that this effect is not observed when there is at least one option that serves the incidental goal in the choice set, or when the choice options serve a goal from an unrelated, non-conflicting domain (e.g., the incidental goal to relax in the example above).

The findings of this research make several novel contributions. While past research has explored how consumers make decisions when they have multiple active goals (e.g., Fishbach and Dhar 2005, 2007; Laran 2010; Pocheptsova, Peterson, and Etkin 2015), to the best of our knowledge, no work to date has explored how an incidental goal affects a subsequent

choice among alternatives that all directly conflict with that goal. These findings also add to the literature on justification in choice, which finds that consumers can resolve choice conflict by choosing an intermediate option (Dhar, Nowlis, and Sherman 2000). In contrast, we find that when consumers experience goal conflict and cannot satisfy both goals, it is easier to justify choosing the option that is most instrumental for satisfying one of the two relevant goals.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. A brief review of prior research motivates the prediction that when all available options serve a choice-set goal that conflicts with an incidental goal, consumers are more likely to choose the most instrumental option for attaining the choice-set goal. Six experiments investigate this prediction by manipulating whether a goal (e.g., savings or health) is active before asking participants to choose between two options that conflict with that goal (e.g., indulgent purchases or indulgent snacks). We also test for alternate accounts and find support for an explanation based on an increased need for justification under these conditions of conflict. The article concludes with a discussion of theoretical and practical implications for these findings as well as future directions for this research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A well-established theme in consumer psychology research is that consumers' choices often reflect their goals (Higgins 1997; Markman and Brendl 2000; Kruglanski et al. 2018). While consumers generally hold many different goals simultaneously, due to limited cognitive resources, only a few goals will be accessible and active at a given time (Fishbach and Dhar 2007). Therefore, any given choice may or may not be relevant to a consumer's active goals. Certain goals, which we term *incidental goals*, may be active for reasons unrelated to a given choice. As in our opening example, each woman had a goal (i.e., to lose weight or to relax) that existed independent of the choice among desserts they were presented at the end of dinner. Incidental goals may become active due to factors in the environment; for example, prior research has shown that a health magazine displayed in the decision environment can activate a health goal (Fishbach et al. 2003), or a picture of one's mother can activate an achievement goal (Fitzsimons and Bargh 2003). Alternatively, incidental goals may be active because they are chronic or long-term goals one maintains, such as the goal to have a healthy lifestyle (Fishbach et al. 2003; Scott et al. 2008). Conversely, other goals, which we term *choice-set goals*, are inherently associated with a choice task, because

they are cognitively linked to the choice stimuli. For example, most consumers recognize that the primary goal associated with a choice among desserts is to indulge and enjoy a tasty treat, just as the primary goal associated with a choice among spinach options is to eat something healthy (an inference we will support subsequently with data).

Prior research has examined consumer decision making in contexts where an incidental goal aligns with a choice-set goal, such as when a consumer is primed with a health goal and then given a choice among healthy options (Chartrand et al. 2008). Other work has explored how an incidental goal affects choices when the choice-set goal is ambiguous, such as when a consumer primed with a health goal is given a choice among options that are healthy versus indulgent (Fishbach et al. 2003). However, an interesting yet underresearched area is how people choose when an incidental goal they hold can conflict with the choice-set goal. The current research attempts to address this gap.

The prior literature on goal theory might predict that in such situations, choices would be guided toward options that serve both goals. Research on multiple goals suggests that when consumers have more than one active goal, they may try to simultaneously satisfy each of their goals to some extent, a strategy often described as balancing (for a review, see Huber et al. 2008). For example, when people have an incidental goal related to self-expressiveness, they might choose to invest in a prestige brand that offers identity-relevant benefits, even at the expense of maximizing their goal of financial gains (Aspara, Chakravarti, and Hoffman 2015). A different line of research has found that people may try to balance their goals by alternating which goal is maximized across sequential choices (Dhar and Simonson 2000). Accordingly, a diner with goals both to lose weight and to enjoy delicious food might order a healthy entrée and an indulgent dessert. Such findings might therefore suggest that a consumer with an incidental goal to lose weight who faces a choice among indulgent desserts would choose the indulgent option that is most consistent with the weight-loss goal—presumably, the least indulgent dessert. However, research in this area has not explored consumer decision making in single-choice scenarios, such as those we present, in which the consumer will violate an incidental goal by choosing any of the available alternatives.

In contrast to the multiple goals perspective, we predict that the experience of goal conflict in such scenarios will increase the likelihood that consumers will choose the option that is most instrumental for attaining the choice-set goal, even if that option presents the greatest violation of the inci-

denal goal. This occurs because the conflict that consumers experience due to the opposing behavioral implications associated with the incidental goal and the choice-set goal increases the need to justify their choice. Prior research has established that the experience of choice conflict leads to more careful processing and the increased need to justify choices (Shafir, Simonson, and Tversky 1993; Kleiman and Hassin 2013). For example, when consumers experience conflict due to the difficulty of trading off attribute levels among available choice options, they deliberate longer, and are ultimately more likely to choose a compromise option (Dhar et al. 2000). Goal conflict in particular (as compared to choice conflict) has been shown to facilitate systematic information processing and reduce the confirmation bias. Whereas the confirmation bias often results from selective hypothesis testing, in which consumers search for information consistent with their viewpoints (Wason 1960; Klayman and Ha 1987), goal conflict instead facilitates a mind-set in which consumers view a situation from multiple perspectives (Kleiman and Hassin 2013). In a similar vein, goal conflict has been shown to enable consumers to make trade-offs, which reduces both choice deferral and choice of the compromise option (Savary et al. 2015). We extend this work by examining the consequences of goal conflict in situations where the incidental goal cannot be satisfied by any option in the choice set and, in fact, will be violated if the consumer chooses any of the alternatives.

In such scenarios, we contend that the most justifiable option will be the option that is most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal. Although many different goals might be considered when choosing among chocolate bars, as discussed previously, the majority of consumers would agree that the primary goal people generally associate with eating chocolate is to indulge and enjoy a tasty treat. We predict that options that are most instrumental for attaining these widely recognized choice-set goals will be easier to justify choosing than options that are less instrumental. Since our choice scenarios do not allow the incidental goal to be served to any extent (i.e., there is no option that does not violate the incidental goal), we propose that attaining another relevant goal to the greatest possible extent provides the consumer with a defensible reason for violating the incidental goal. Reflecting back to the title of this article, this implies that one will not “blow one’s diet on Twinkies” (i.e., a commonplace, low-cost, low-quality indulgence) but instead will be more likely to do so for an outcome that maximizes indulgence and is hence “worth it.”

In sum, we propose that when faced with a choice between options that serve one goal (e.g., a choice-set goal)

that conflicts with another goal they hold (e.g., an incidental goal), consumers experience an increased need to justify their choice. Because maximizing on the choice-set goal is justifiable (vs. violating one's incidental goal for subpar choice-set goal attainment), consumers holding a conflicting incidental goal are more likely to choose the option that is most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal. Note that while we predict that goal conflict will shift preference toward the most instrumental option for attaining the choice-set goal, we contend that this will only be the case if all of the alternatives serve a conflicting choice-set goal, such that choosing any option will violate the incidental goal. Therefore, when one or more of the available choice options does not conflict with the incidental goal (i.e., options that allow the incidental goal to be served are available), we posit that goal activation will increase choice of options that best serve the incidental goal. Further, when the choice options serve a choice-set goal from an unrelated domain that does not directly conflict with the incidental goal, as was the case with the spa-goer who had an incidental goal to relax, we similarly predict that our proposed pattern of choosing the most instrumental option for attaining the choice-set goal will attenuate. The incidental goal will not be violated by making a choice, and hence the need for justification will not be heightened.

We explore these predictions by testing for the proposed effect as well as the relevant boundary conditions specified by the theoretical framework in six experiments. Experiments 1, 2, and 3 show that choosing among options that conflict with an incidental goal increases preference for the option that is most instrumental for attaining the choice-set goal. Experiment 4 demonstrates that our pattern of results holds when all options in the choice set conflict with the incidental goal but not when some options serve that goal. Experiment 5 also confirms the role of goal conflict, by showing that when the choice-set goal does not conflict with the incidental goal, choice is not affected. Finally, experiment 6 tests for evidence of our proposed theoretical mechanism by examining the role of the need for justification. Specifically, we show that prompting participants to justify their choice increases preference for options that are most instrumental for attaining the choice-set goal, similar to the effect observed when the choice options serve a choice-set goal that conflicts with participants' incidental goal. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical implications of these findings, in addition to the practical implications these findings have for consumers and marketers.

EXPERIMENT 1: SAVINGS GOAL ACTIVATION AND THE CHOICE OF INDULGENT HOTEL STAYS

Experiment 1 was designed to test our central hypothesis that when all options in the choice set conflict with an incidental goal, consumers will be more likely to choose the option that is most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal (i.e., the primary goal served by the options in the choice set). To test this prediction, we manipulate whether or not a savings goal is incidentally activated and then present participants with a choice between two indulgent hotel stays, one of which offers superior indulgence.

Method

One hundred and four undergraduate students (30% male; age data not collected) participated in a laboratory session in exchange for small monetary compensation. The experiment was presented as two seemingly unrelated tasks. For the first task, all participants were shown pictures of six book covers and were asked to indicate which, if any, of the books they had read. In the savings goal condition, three of the books were relevant to the goal of saving money, whereas in the control condition none of the books were related to the goal of saving money (see app. A for stimuli; apps. A–L are available online). After reviewing the book covers, all participants were asked to reference one book (savings goal = *How to Save Money Every Day*; control = *The Wright Brothers*) and write a short paragraph answering the following question: "Why is this book more popular now than ever?"

All participants then moved on to a choice task, presented as a separate study, in which they faced a choice between two choice options that conflicted with a savings goal. Participants were instructed to imagine that they were planning to go on an indulgent weekend getaway to Puerto Vallarta. They were presented with pictures and descriptions of two luxury resorts: the Puerto Vallarta Resort and Spa (\$944/four nights) and the Villa Nuevo Vallarta (\$524/four nights; see app. B for stimuli). The main dependent variable was participants' choice of the more indulgent hotel.

To confirm that the primary goal in this context was to indulge, a pretest was conducted ($N = 50$; participants drawn from Amazon's Mechanical Turk). In it, we defined a choice-set goal for participants (app. C provides all details for this pretest as well as all subsequent pretests). We next presented participants with the choice among luxury resorts that was used in the main experiment and asked them to select the primary goal associated with the choice set from a

list of the following: “to indulge and have an enjoyable vacation,” “to save money and be economical,” “to spend money,” “to be healthy,” or “other.” The majority of participants (86%) selected “to indulge and have an enjoyable vacation” (results compared to 50%: $z = 5.09, p < .001$).

A second pretest ($N = 69$; participants drawn from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk) confirmed that Puerto Vallarta Resort and Spa was seen as the most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal of indulgence: “Which option is going to provide the maximum indulgence?” (scale: 1 = definitely the Villa Nuevo Vallarta to 7 = definitely the Puerto Vallarta Resort and Spa; mean compared to the midpoint [4 = “no difference”]; $M = 6.19, t(68) = 11.90, p < .001$). Further, both options were seen as conflicting with the incidental savings goal (question: “To what extent would choosing either of these options conflict with the goal to save money?” [scale: 1 = does not conflict with the goal to save money to 5 = strongly conflicts with the goal to save money]; means compared to the midpoint (3); $M = 3.71, t(68) = 5.07, p < .001$). We ran similar pretests for all subsequent studies and report the full results in appendix C.

After completing the choice task, all participants indicated the extent to which they were experiencing a variety of negative mood states (ashamed, upset, guilty, distressed, irritable; all scales: 1 = not at all to 5 = very much). In addition, they completed an overall mood measure (question: “How would you rate your mood overall?” [scale: 1 = very bad mood to 13 = very good mood]).

Results and Discussion

We hypothesized that consumers will be more likely to choose the option that is most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal (here, the more expensive Puerto Vallarta Resort and Spa) when they have an incidental goal related to savings (vs. a control condition). Consistent with this prediction, participants in the savings goal condition were significantly more likely to choose the Puerto Vallarta Resort and Spa than those in the control condition ($P_{\text{savings}} = 68\%$ vs. $P_{\text{control}} = 46\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 5.27, p = .02$).

Further, because prior findings have attributed behaviors following a goal violation to negative moods (e.g., the what the hell [WTH] effect; see Cochran and Tesser 1996; see also Soman and Cheema 2006; Wilcox, Block, and Eisenstein 2011), we tested whether the goal manipulation affected various mood measures. We observed no effect of the goal manipulation on how ashamed, upset, guilty, and/or distressed participants felt following their choice (all $F < 1$), as well as a marginal decrease in irritability

($M_{\text{savings}} = 1.66, SD = .98$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 2.00, SD = .99$; $F(1, 102) = 3.04, p = .085$) and a directional increase in overall mood ($M_{\text{savings}} = 9.86, SD = 2.54$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 8.98, SD = 2.64$; $F(1, 97) = 2.75, p = .101$). The latter two results in particular are inconsistent with a mood-based account of our observed effect. Further, none of these mood measures mediated the effect on choice (i.e., the 95% confidence intervals [CIs] included zero; 5,000 resamples).

The results of experiment 1 demonstrate that when all options in the choice set conflict with an incidental goal, people were more likely to choose the option that is most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal—in this case, indulgence. We contend that this occurs because the conflict that consumers experience due to the opposing behavioral implications of their incidental goal and the choice-set goal increases the need to justify their choice. In experiment 2, we conceptually replicate these results with a different incidental goal (health goal vs. control) and a different choice set (indulgent snacks). Further, because taste preferences might overwhelm the effect of incidental goals in real-world choices, this experiment was conducted in a context that allowed for consequential choices.

EXPERIMENT 2: HEALTH GOAL ACTIVATION AND THE CHOICE OF INDULGENT SNACKS

The goal of experiment 2 was to replicate the results of experiment 1 in a different domain. This experiment was also designed to validate the ecological validity of our effects by using a consequential choice design.

Method

Sixty-eight undergraduate and graduate students (38% male; $M_{\text{age}} = 21.9, SD = 2.5$) participated in a laboratory session in exchange for small monetary compensation. The experiment was presented as two seemingly unrelated tasks. For the first task, participants were shown pictures of six magazine covers and were asked to indicate which, if any, of the magazines they subscribed to. In the health goal condition, four of the magazines were relevant to the goal of health (see app. D for stimuli). After reviewing the magazine covers, all participants were asked to reference one magazine (health goal = *Better Nutrition*; control = *Shutterbug*) and write a short paragraph answering the following question: “Why is this magazine more popular now than ever?”

After completing the initial task, all participants were given a choice task, which was presented as additional compensation for participation. Participants read instructions stating the following: “Time for a little indulgence! To thank

you for participating in the studies up to this point, we would like to offer you your choice of one of the two doughnuts below.” They were then offered their choice of an Entenmann’s “ultimate rich chocolate frosted + drizzle” doughnut or an Entenmann’s glazed doughnut (the options were pictured and named but no other information was provided; see app. E for stimuli). Pretesting confirmed that both doughnut options were seen as conflicting with a health goal, both doughnut options were seen as primarily serving a goal to indulge, and the “ultimate rich chocolate frosted + drizzle” doughnut was seen as the most instrumental option for attaining the indulgence goal (see app. C). After making their choice, participants turned the page and were informed that they would be given their doughnut as they exited the lab. Participants were then asked to rate their mood (question: “How is your mood right now?” [scale: 1 = very bad to 9 = very good]).

Results and Discussion

Replicating the results of experiment 1 with consequential choices, participants who experienced goal conflict, because they had an incidental goal related to health, were more likely to choose the option that was the most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal of indulgence (i.e., the “ultimate rich chocolate frosted + drizzle” doughnut; $P_{\text{health}} = 73\%$ vs. $P_{\text{control}} = 46\%$; $\chi^2(1) = 5.20$; $p = .02$). Further, there was no effect of the goal manipulation on mood ($F < 1$) and a shift in mood did not mediate the effect of the goal manipulation on choice (i.e., the 95% CI included zero; 5,000 resamples). These results converge with the results of experiment 1 to suggest the observed effect on choice is robust to different goal manipulations and different choice contexts (i.e., hypothetical and real), and that the observed results are unlikely to occur due to an effect of the goal manipulation on mood.

Note that in this experiment, although we did not provide participants with an explicit “no choice” option within the choice task, participants were not required to accept a doughnut when they exited the lab; however, all of the participants did. Although we did not verify whether participants actually ate the doughnuts, this provides suggestive evidence that consumers are often unlikely to defer choices, even when choosing any of the options can mean violating an incidental goal. Our stimuli thus reflect many choices in the real world that do not offer an explicit deferral option.

One limitation of the first two experiments is that in both cases the incidental goal (i.e., savings or health) pertained to self-control, and the choice options were associated

with indulgence. Therefore, it is possible that the observed results may be specific to conflicts that occur in such contexts. Instead, we posit that the observed effects are driven by conflict more generally, and thus we should observe a shift in preferences even when the incidental goal is not related to self-control. In particular, we predict that when a conflicting incidental goal associated with indulgence is activated prior to the choice, preference will shift toward the option that is the most instrumental in attaining a choice-set goal related to self-control (i.e., the healthiest option among healthy options). Experiment 3 will test for this directly.

Additionally, one potential alternate explanation for our pattern of results is that activating a goal then presenting participants with a choice among options that conflict with that goal would lead to the experience of psychological reactance, which would drive people to choose the option that presents the greatest violation of the incidental goal (Hong and Faedda 1996). Chronic reactance has been shown to moderate how people respond to goal-related stimuli (e.g., a significant other’s goal; Chartrand, Dalton, and Fitzsimons 2007). If reactance were driving our observed effect, we would expect a significant condition by reactance interaction, such that participants who are high (vs. low) in psychological reactance would be more likely to choose the most instrumental option for attaining the choice-set goal when experiencing conflict, but there would be no difference between high and low reactance individuals in the absence of conflict. We include the Hong psychological reactance scale in experiment 3 to test for this possibility.

EXPERIMENT 3: INDULGENCE GOAL ACTIVATION AND THE CHOICE OF HEALTHY FOODS

The goal of experiment 3 was to test if the effects of goal activation on choice observed in experiments 1 and 2 would replicate when the incidental goal was associated with indulgence and the choice-set goal was associated with self-control. In order to test this, we manipulated whether or not an indulgence goal was activated, then presented participants with a task involving a choice between two healthy food options, one of which was portrayed as healthier (i.e., was more instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal of health). Further, we included the Hong psychological reactance scale to test for a reactance-based account of our results.

Method

Four hundred and two participants from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk online panel (43% male; $M_{\text{age}} = 36.5$, $SD = 11.8$)

participated in two seemingly unrelated tasks for a small monetary compensation. For the first task, all participants were shown pictures of six magazine covers and were asked to indicate which, if any, of the magazines they had read. The magazines used in the control condition were identical to those used in experiment 2. In the indulgence goal condition, however, all of the magazines were relevant to the goal of indulgence (see app. F for stimuli). After reviewing the magazine covers, all participants were asked to reference one magazine (control = *Shutterbug*; indulgence goal = *Seduced by Bacon*) and write a short paragraph answering the following question: “Why is this magazine more popular now than ever?”

All participants then moved on to a choice among options designed to conflict with an indulgence goal. This task was presented as a separate study. Participants were instructed to imagine that they were shopping for spinach to make a healthy salad. They were presented with pictures and descriptions of two types of spinach: Neiman Ranch Spinach (“An excellent choice for health! Fortified with Vitamin C, Rich in beta-carotene”) and Asher’s Produce (“Taste the freshness! Locally sourced for superior taste and maximum flavor”; see app. G for stimuli). The main dependent variable was participants’ choice of the option that was the most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal (i.e., Neiman Ranch Spinach). Pretesting confirmed that both spinach options were seen as conflicting with an indulgence goal; both spinach options were seen as primarily serving a goal to be healthy; and finally the Neiman Ranch Spinach was seen as the most instrumental option for attaining the health goal (see app. C).

Participants also completed the Hong psychological reactance scale (Hong and Felda 1996). In order to make sure the choice task did not influence responses to the reactance scale, nor did completing the scale influence choices during the task, we counterbalanced whether participants completed the reactance scale before or after completing the other parts of the experiment. However, we did not find any effect of when the scale was completed on either spinach choice ($P_{\text{before}} = 45\%$ vs. $P_{\text{after}} = 41\%$; $\chi^2(1) = 0.64$; NS) or on reactance measures ($M_{\text{before}} = 57.0$, $SD = 13.8$ vs. $M_{\text{after}} = 56.3$; $SD = 13.8$, $F(1, 401) = 0.23$; NS). Therefore, we collapsed across order of scale completion for all subsequent analyses.

Results and Discussion

We hypothesized that preference for the option that was the most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal (i.e.,

health) will increase when consumers have a conflicting incidental goal (i.e., indulgence), relative to a control condition. Consistent with this prediction and prior results, participants in the indulgence goal condition were significantly more likely to choose the Neiman Ranch Spinach than those in the control condition ($P_{\text{indulge}} = 48\%$ vs. $P_{\text{control}} = 38\%$; $\chi^2(1) = 3.94$; $p = .047$).

Next we conducted a logistic regression to test whether there was a significant interaction between psychological reactance and goal condition. The interaction was not significant ($b = -.014$, $SE = .015$, $p = .339$), which makes a reactance-based account unlikely.

Taken together, experiments 1, 2, and 3 demonstrate robust support for our prediction that when all options in the choice set conflict with an incidental goal, consumers will be more likely to choose the option that is most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal. Building on these results, experiments 4, 5, and 6 will test for more direct evidence of the roles of goal activation, conflict, and the need for justification in choice.

EXPERIMENT 4: VALIDATING THE ROLE OF GOAL ACTIVATION

Experiment 4 explores a boundary condition that reconciles our observed results with previous research. We predict that participants will choose the option that is most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal only when they experience conflict between the incidental goal and the available choice alternatives, and not when the available options do not conflict with the incidental goal. We vary the nature of the choice set (i.e., both options conflict with the incidental goal vs. both options do not conflict with the incidental goal) to test for this.

Method

Pretests. A series of pretests was conducted to identify one pair of options in which both options conflicted with a health goal, and a second pair of options within the same product category in which both options did not conflict with a health goal. For brevity, we report these pretests in detail in appendix C.

On the basis of these pretests, chocolate bars with 415 and 485 calories were selected as the pair of options wherein both options conflicted with a health goal, and chocolate bars with 115 and 185 calories were selected as the pair of options that did not conflict with a health goal. Appendix H presents all choice stimuli. As in prior experiments, pretesting confirmed that both the 415 and the 485 calorie choco-

late bar were seen as primarily serving a goal to indulge; and the 485 calorie chocolate bar was seen as the most instrumental option for attaining the indulgence goal (see app. C). The 115 and 185 calorie chocolate bars were not seen as conflicting with a health goal; however, the 185 calorie chocolate bar was seen as the most instrumental option for attaining the indulgence goal (see app. C).

In the main experiment, 114 female undergraduate students (age data not collected) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions based on a 2 (prime: health goal vs. control) \times 2 (choice set: options conflict with the incidental goal vs. options do not conflict with the incidental goal) design. We used the same health goal manipulation as in experiment 2. For the choice task, all participants were asked to imagine that they had decided to indulge in a tasty snack. Half of the participants made a choice between two options that conflicted with an incidental goal related to health (high-calorie chocolate bars: 415 calories and 485 calories). The remaining half made a choice between two options that did not conflict with an incidental goal related to health (low-calorie chocolate bars: 115 calories and 185 calories). The main dependent variable was participants' choice of chocolate bar.

Results and Discussion

As predicted, a binary logistic regression revealed a significant interaction between goal condition and choice-set condition ($\beta = 2.43$, Wald = 8.37, $p = .004$). In line with our previous results, among participants who made choices between options that conflicted with an incidental goal related to health (i.e., two high-calorie chocolate bars), participants in the health goal condition were significantly more likely to choose the higher-calorie option that was most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal (i.e., indulgence) than those in the control condition ($P_{\text{health}} = 57\%$ vs. $P_{\text{control}} = 22\%$; $\chi^2(1) = 5.9$; $p = .01$). In contrast, when participants chose between two low-calorie chocolate bars that did not conflict with an incidental goal related to health, participants in the health goal condition were less likely to choose the higher-calorie option than those in the control condition ($P_{\text{health}} = 28\%$ vs. $P_{\text{control}} = 48\%$; $\chi^2(1) = 3.0$; $p = .08$; see fig. 1 for results).

These results demonstrate that consumers do not experience goal conflict (and hence the need to justify their choices) in all choice contexts. When the options in a choice task do not conflict with an incidental goal (e.g., a choice among low-calorie chocolate bars does not conflict with a health goal), we find consumers are more likely to make choices that are consistent with their incidental goals (e.g., the lower-calorie

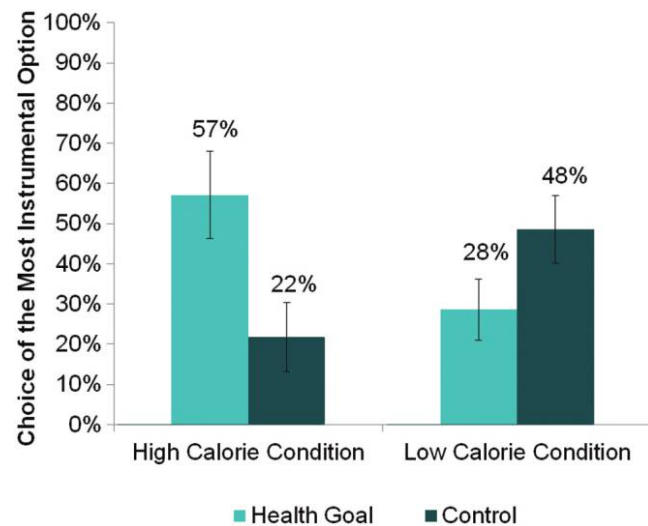


Figure 1. Experiment 4: Goal conflict moderates the effect of a health goal on choice of the most instrumental option. Error bars represent 1 standard error.

chocolate bar). These results help reconcile the effects observed thus far with prior findings in the literature showing that people make choices consistent with their incidental goals (e.g., Bargh et al. 2001).

Additionally, these results offer evidence against a “goal release” account of our effects. According to this account, when participants face a choice between chocolate bars that conflict with their incidental goal, they “release” the incidental goal, causing its level of accessibility to be suppressed below that of people in the control group. Such effects have been observed in prior research on how context can moderate the effects of goal priming (Laran and Janiszewski 2009). Because participants in the low-calorie chocolate bar condition made choices consistent with the incidental goal, the goal release account is unlikely. However, to further test for this possible explanation, we conducted a posttest. In it, participants were randomly assigned to complete either a task that activated a health goal or one that was goal-neutral (i.e., a control condition). Next all participants viewed the choice between high-calorie chocolate bars used in experiment 4. At this point, we assessed the extent to which a health goal was cognitively accessible using a lexical decision task (Bargh, Chen, and Burrows 1996; Laran and Janiszewski 2009). Results revealed that those in the health goal condition (vs. control) still showed significantly higher levels of health goal activation following exposure to goal conflicting options, which further renders a release-based account of our results unlikely (see app. I for additional details regarding this posttest).

The first four experiments have demonstrated that consumers choose the option that is most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal when they experience conflict between the incidental goal and the available choice alternatives. However, all of the experimental designs thus far have consistently compared the effects of a condition where an incidental goal is activated to a control condition in which no goal is activated. Our theorizing contends that it is not the mere activation of an incidental goal, but rather the activation of an incidental goal that conflicts with the available choice options, that drives the observed results. Experiment 5 will examine this directly.

EXPERIMENT 5: VALIDATING THE ROLE OF CONFLICT

Experiment 5 builds on prior results by manipulating the nature of the incidental goal (i.e., a health goal vs. a goal to “go green”). Half of the participants were then presented with a choice among indulgent chocolate bars, which pose a conflict only for those with an incidental goal related to health. The other half of the participants were presented with a choice among indulgent sports utility vehicle (SUV) rentals, which pose a conflict only for those with an incidental goal to “go green.” We predict that choice of the option that is most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal will increase only when the incidental goal conflicts with the choice options but not when the incidental goal does not pose a conflict.

Method

One hundred and seventy-two undergraduate students (48% male; age data not collected) participated in a laboratory session in exchange for small monetary compensation. The experiment was presented as two seemingly unrelated tasks. For the first task, all participants were primed with a goal. Specifically, participants were randomly assigned to a health goal condition or a “go green” goal condition. Those assigned to the health goal condition were asked to list three reasons why they felt that “health and fitness” were important to students on their campus. Those in the “go green” goal condition were asked to list three reasons why “going green” was important to students on their campus.

All participants then moved on to a choice task. For half of the participants, the choice options were designed to conflict with a goal related to health yet not with a goal related to “going green.” Specifically, they were instructed to imagine that they were looking to indulge themselves with a box of chocolates. One box of chocolates was labeled the “Pre-

mium Chocolate Collection” (priced at \$66.78) and the other was labeled the “Classic Chocolate Collection” (priced at \$58.01). Importantly, because the two options varied on price, and not calorie perceptions (unlike experiments 2 and 4), the two chocolate collections were seen as posing equivalent violations of a health goal (see app. C for pretest data that supports this). In addition, as in prior experiments, pretesting confirmed that both chocolate box options were seen as conflicting with a health goal; both options were not seen as conflicting with a goal to “go green”; both the options were seen as primarily serving a goal to indulge; and finally the Premium Collection was seen as the most instrumental option for attaining the indulgence goal (see app. C). Accordingly, these stimuli allow us to test for the role of conflict in a context where the products’ instrumentality in attaining the choice-set goal (here, indulgence) is unrelated to perceptions of (un)healthiness and thus not confounded with goal violation.

The remaining half of participants were assigned to choose among options designed to conflict with an incidental goal related to “going green” and not with a health goal. Specifically, they were instructed to imagine that they were looking to indulge themselves with a weekend getaway, and they were looking to rent a luxury car. Their choice options were a BMW X5 SUV (priced at \$199/day) and a BMW X3 SUV (priced at \$129/day). See appendix J for stimuli. Pretesting again confirmed that both options were seen as conflicting with a “go green” goal; both options were not seen as conflicting with a health goal; both the options were seen as primarily serving a goal to indulge and enjoy a car with luxury features; and finally the BMW X5 SUV was seen as the most instrumental option for attaining the indulgence goal (see app. C).

Results and Discussion

As predicted, a binary logistic regression revealed a significant interaction between the incidental goal condition and choice-set condition ($\beta = 2.20$, Wald = .712, $p = .002$). Consistent with our predictions, among participants who made choices between options that conflicted with an incidental goal related to health (i.e., two chocolate collections), participants in the health goal condition were significantly more likely to choose the option that was most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal (i.e., indulgence) than those with a “go green” goal ($P_{\text{health}} = 69\%$ vs. $P_{\text{green}} = 38\%$; $\chi^2(1) = 5.04$; $p = .025$). In contrast, when participants chose between two options that conflicted with an incidental goal related to “going green” (i.e., two luxury SUV

rentals), the goal manipulation had the opposite effect on choice: participants with an incidental goal to “go green” were significantly more likely to choose the option that was most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal (i.e., indulgence) than those with an incidental goal related to health ($P_{\text{green}} = 47\%$ vs. $P_{\text{health}} = 26\%$; $\chi^2(1) = 5.33$; $p = .021$; see fig. 2).

Thus far, we have replicated the predicted effect of incidental goals on choice in different domains (i.e., savings, health, indulgence, going green), and provided evidence for the role of conflict. We have shown that such effects can be ironic, when the option in the choice set that is most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal also poses the greatest conflict to the incidental goal (e.g., experiments 1, 2, 3, and 4). However, this need not be the case. Experiment 4 reveals that having an incidental goal (e.g., health) can increase choice of the option that best serves that goal when goal-consistent options are available (i.e., no conflict exists). Further, experiment 5 reveals that incidental goals can increase choice of the option that is most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal, even in contexts when such options do not pose the greatest violation of the incidental goal (i.e., because indulgence was manipulated by price, not health perceptions). These data also cast greater doubt on a reactance-based account, suggesting that because consumers could not choose an option that served their incidental goal, they reacted against the incidental goal and thus became more likely to choose whichever option presented a greater

violation of that goal. Next, experiment 6 will conclude by validating the role of the need for justification in this process.

EXPERIMENT 6: VALIDATING THE ROLE OF THE NEED FOR JUSTIFICATION

To provide additional support for our theoretical mechanism, we test if an external prompt to justify one's choice will lead to a similar pattern of preferences as the presence of a conflicting incidental goal. To do so, we cross whether a conflicting goal is activated prior to choice with whether participants are asked to provide reasons for their choice before choosing. We predict that asking people to justify their choices will lead to the same increase in choice of the most instrumental option for achieving the choice-set goal as activating a conflicting incidental goal. Further, asking people to provide reasons for their choice should not have an incremental effect over activating a conflicting incidental goal, since we propose that participants with an active conflicting incidental goal already experience a need to justify their choice.

Method

Four hundred and four female undergraduates from a university-based online student participant pool (age data not collected) participated in exchange for small monetary compensation. They were randomly assigned to one of four conditions based on a 2 (goal: health goal vs. control) \times 2 (explicit justification of choice: required vs. not required) design. We replicated the experimental paradigm used in experiments 2 and 4, activating a health goal using the same task.

For the choice task, all participants were given a choice between two options designed to conflict with an incidental goal related to health. They were instructed to imagine that they were looking to reward themselves with an indulgent snack. The snack was a choice of chocolate bar, an Asher's chocolate bar priced at \$2.99 or a Scharffen Berger chocolate bar priced at \$4.99. See appendix K for the choice stimuli. As in prior experiments, pretesting confirmed that both options were seen as conflicting with a health goal; both options were seen as primarily serving a goal to indulge; and finally the \$4.99 chocolate bar was seen as the most instrumental option for attaining the indulgence goal (see app. C). Further, because perceptions of indulgence were manipulated via price (and not calorie content), the options did not differ in terms of their perceived (un)healthiness (see also app. C).

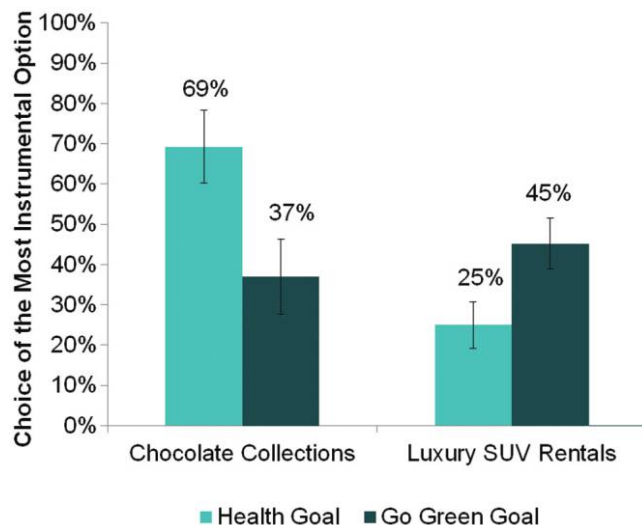


Figure 2. Experiment 5: Effects of incidental goal and choice-set goal on choice of the most instrumental option. Error bars represent 1 standard error.

Half of the participants proceeded directly to the choice. The remaining half of participants received additional instructions prior to making their choice. Specifically, they were asked to provide a written justification for their choice. Following Simonson and Nowlis (2000), participants in the justification required condition were instructed as follows: "Before you make your choice, we will ask you to explain your decision. Briefly explain why you are selecting the option that you intend to choose."

Results and Discussion

As predicted, a binary logistic regression revealed a marginally significant interaction between the incidental goal condition and justification condition ($\beta = -.676$, Wald = 2.43, $p = .1$). Consistent with our predictions and our prior results, when no external justification was required, participants with an incidental goal related to health were significantly more likely to select option that was most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal (i.e., indulgence; $P_{\text{health}} = 37\%$ vs. $P_{\text{control}} = 24\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 4.0$, $p = .04$). We propose that this occurs because people are prone to choosing options that are easier to justify when all available options conflict with an incidental goal. In support of this, participants in the control condition who were asked to provide an external justification for their choice were also more likely to select the option that was most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal than those who were not asked to provide a written justification ($P_{\text{justification}} = 37\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no justification}} = 24\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 3.2$, $p = .07$; see fig. 3).

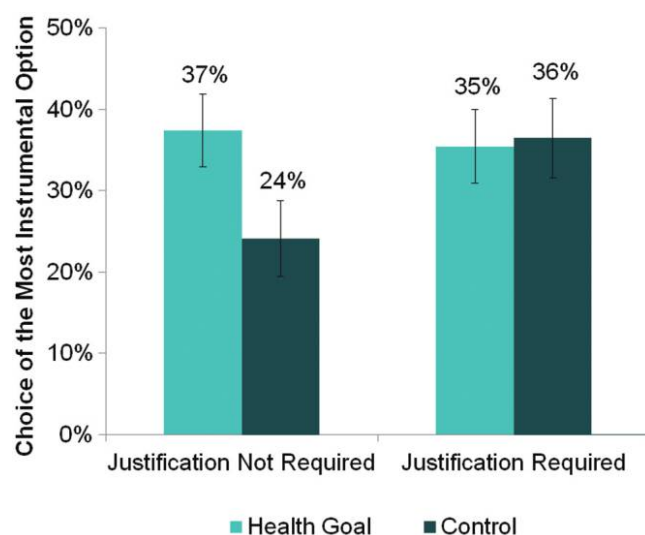


Figure 3. Experiment 6: Effects of goal conflict and the need for justification on choice. Error bars represent 1 standard error.

This result suggests that, in the absence of an incidental goal related to health, the option that was most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal was seen as the option that was easier to justify. The justification manipulation had no effect on participants in the health goal condition ($P_{\text{no justification}} = 37\%$ vs. $P_{\text{justification}} = 35\%$, $\chi^2(1) = .09$, $p = .763$; for all results see fig. 3), which may suggest that those with an incidental goal related to health were already were experiencing an increased need to justify their choice.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

While recent research has recognized that people maintain many goals, some of which might be conflicting (e.g., Kleiman and Hassin 2011, 2013), relatively little work has explored how people choose when all available choice alternatives conflict with an incidental goal. Six experiments demonstrate convergent evidence that when consumers choose among options that all conflict with an incidental goal, preferences shift toward the most instrumental option for attaining the choice-set goal. We show that these patterns occur for different types of goals, such as savings (experiment 1), health (experiments 2, 4, 5, and 6), indulgence (experiment 3), the goal to go green (experiment 5), and for both real and hypothetical choices.

Our results support the underlying process that the experience of conflict that results from the opposing behavioral implications of the incidental goal and the choice-set goal increases the need for justification. We find that prompting justification in such contexts leads to the same pattern of results as goal conflict (experiment 6). In addition, we demonstrate a boundary to our effect, that consumers only choose the most instrumental option for attaining the choice-set goal when all available alternatives violate the incidental goal, but not when at least one option is consistent with the goal (experiment 4) nor when the choice alternatives serve an unrelated, nonconflicting goal (experiment 5). We also find support for the role of incidental goal activation by demonstrating that people make choices that are consistent with their incidental goals when possible, in line with prior work (experiment 4).

Our findings are inconsistent with alternative accounts for the choice pattern we obtain, such as negative moods, reactance, and goal release. First, we show that participants experiencing goal conflict in our experiments do not report a worse mood than participants in the control condition (experiments 1 and 2). Second, we do not find evidence for a reactance-based account, which would suggest that partici-

pants are reacting against the absence of goal-consistent options by choosing the alternative that violates the incidental goal most. In particular, we observe that individual differences in psychological reactance do not moderate the effect of goal conflict on choice of the most instrumental option for attaining the choice-set goal (experiment 3). Moreover, in experiments 5 and 6, the most instrumental options for attaining the choice-set goal were determined by price, rather than by unhealthiness, so they did not present the greatest violation of the incidental goal. Our predicted pattern of results still emerged, which casts further doubt on a reactance-based account of our effect. Third and finally, a goal-release account of the data, which states that cognitive activation of the incidental goal is suppressed below the level of the control group, is unlikely because people were more likely to choose the option that was consistent with their incidental goal when such an option was available (experiment 4).

Having demonstrated these results, it is necessary to highlight how and why these findings are distinct from certain prior work. While our pattern of results is consistent with prior work on goal violation and the WTH effect (e.g., Cochran and Tesser 1996; Soman and Cheema 2006), in that participants maximize on a conflicting goal in the face of goal violation, our results are distinct for several important reasons. Research on the WTH effect focuses on situations in which consumers hold a specific, daily goal (e.g., consume fewer than 1,500 calories per day), which cannot be attained once violated (e.g., once more than 1,500 calories have been consumed in a given day, that goal is unattainable). Due to negative emotions and demotivation following a goal violation, consumers then continue to further violate the goal (e.g., consuming in excess), rather than returning to goal-consistent behaviors. In contrast, consumers in our experiments have not yet violated a goal prior to the choice, but rather recognize that choosing any option will result in a goal violation. Further, since the goals in our experiments were more general (e.g., the health goal prime in experiments 2, 4, and 6 cognitively activated a health goal without imposing any specific calorie limits or dietary restrictions) those goals may still be recovered subsequent to violation. This may contribute to why we do not observe any negative effects on mood as a result of goal conflict, and instead explain our pattern of results based on a need for justification. Finally, the WTH effect is shown only to result from violating a goal related to self-control, whereas we demonstrate that our pattern of results is more general, and indeed replicates for incidental goals that are not related to self-

control, such as the goal to indulge (experiment 3) or to go green (experiment 5).

In addition, work on compensatory consumption (for review, see Mandel et al. 2017) has documented a similar pattern of results, showing that an unfavorable self-discrepancy in one domain (e.g., doing poorly relative to expectations on an intelligence test) can lead to choices that maximize on a different self-relevant domain (e.g., trying to appear impressive to others). However, such effects have predominately been shown to operate through self-threat and negative moods. In addition, compensatory consumption does not require a conflict between the domain of the self-discrepancy and the domain of compensatory consumption for such effects to occur (e.g., maximizing on the goal to impress others does not conflict with the goal to perform well on an intelligence test). Accordingly, compensatory consumption cannot account for the totality of our results.

Implications, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

Our findings contribute most directly to three streams of literature: behavioral decision theory, goal theory, and justification in choice. Previous literature on behavioral decision theory and goals has explored how consumers choose when they have multiple active goals (e.g., Fishbach and Dhar 2005, 2007; Huber et al. 2008; Laran 2010; Köpetz et al. 2011; Etkin, Evangelidis, and Aaker 2015; Pocheptsova et al. 2015). However, to the best of our knowledge, no work to date has explored how an incidental goal affects a subsequent choice among alternatives that actively conflict with that goal. We find that if consumers cannot balance among their active goals they are more likely to choose the alternative that is most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal, even when that option presents the greatest violation of the incidental goal. This finding also adds to the literature on justification in choice, which has found that consumers often resolve conflict by choosing the intermediate option, which is more likely to provide acceptable levels of both attributes (Dhar et al. 2000). In contrast, we find that when consumers experience goal conflict in situations where both goals cannot be satisfied, it is easier to justify choosing the option that is most instrumental for satisfying one of the relevant goals.

We believe the limitations of the current research suggest interesting areas for further research. One limitation of this work is that none of our experiments provided participants with an explicit no-choice option. The choice contexts in our experiments approximate many real world sce-

narios in which people with incidental goals are confronted with choice alternatives that conflict with one of those goals. In such scenarios, although choice deferral is always a possibility, there are many reasons why consumers may feel motivated to make a choice (e.g., the desire to attain the choice-set goal, social pressure, and/or other factors); as a result, a “forced choice” scenario (i.e., one in which a no-choice option is not made explicit) may be more ecologically valid than one that explicitly highlights a no-choice option (Dhar and Simonson 2003). For example, in our opening example, a dessert is included with a *prix-fixe* menu. Although consumers have the option of forgoing the free dessert, the deferral option is not explicitly presented, so consumers may not sufficiently consider it (Nowlis, Kahn, and Dhar 2002). As a result, many people may still choose to enjoy the free treat in such scenarios, even if doing so violates their incidental goal. A possible future research direction could be to explore if and how adding an explicit no-choice option changes choice patterns.

A second limitation is that the experiments focused exclusively on binary choices. Past research on choice conflict has found that when consumers face a choice between three alternatives with varying attribute levels (e.g., a low price/low quality option, a high price/high quality option, and an intermediate price/intermediate quality option), consumers often resolve the conflict by choosing the intermediate, or compromise, option (Dhar et al. 2000). Our findings would suggest that in situations where all of the available choice alternatives conflict with an incidental goal, consumers would instead find it easiest to justify choosing an extreme option that is most instrumental in attaining the choice-set goal. Future research could thus explore choice contexts with three or more alternatives that all conflict with an incidental goal, in order to examine the implications of goal conflict and the need for justification on choices in such scenarios.

Another limitation is that our choice sets were constructed to make a single goal salient (e.g., savings, indulgence, or health). Consumers were thus able to easily recognize the primary choice-set goal (Shah and Kruglanski 2002; Friedman, Savary, and Dhar 2018) and therefore, maximizing on the choice-set goal, provided a justification for violating their incidental goal. In reality, however, there may be situations in which the choice set activates more than one goal. For instance, choice alternatives that vary in indulgence may also vary in terms of how scarce they are. In such situations, consumers may instead justify their choices by selecting the scarce alternative (for review, see Cannon, Goldsmith, and Roux, forthcoming), rather than maximizing on the indulgence

goal. Future research could explore whether our effect holds when choice alternatives activate multiple goals or if the salience of a single choice-set goal is a necessary condition.

Another extension of the current experiments could be to examine whether the observed effects extend to situations where the incidental goal is chronic, rather than situationally activated. In the current set of experiments, the goal was always activated through an experimental task. Alternatively, in many cases, consumers may have incidental goals that are chronically accessible. To address this limitation, we conducted a preliminary correlational study in which we explored whether people with a chronic goal to eat healthy (Fishbach et al. 2003; Scott et al. 2008) who faced a choice among chocolate bars that served the goal to indulge would be more likely to choose the chocolate bar that was most instrumental for attaining the choice-set goal (i.e., indulgence). Please refer to appendix L for full details of the study. Briefly, participants were first asked to what extent they agreed with the statement, “I make a very conscious effort to eat healthy.” They were then presented with the choice of chocolate bars used in experiment 6. As expected, we found that participants who reported greater agreement with the healthy eating statement were significantly more likely to subsequently select the more indulgent chocolate bar. While these data provide initial evidence that our effect indeed extends to chronic incidental goals, rather than just incidentally activated goals, more research is needed to explore the limitations of this effect. For example, it is not clear whether the most committed dieters would be most likely to demonstrate the effect, or whether we might instead observe a nonlinear pattern (e.g., perhaps the effect attenuates among extreme dieters). Greater exploration of how this effect operates in the real world with long-term chronic goals would contribute to the broader understanding of self-control and the nonconscious factors that bias choices in favor of unhealthy eating (e.g., McFerran et al. 2010).

The current research also suggests several interesting practical implications. Retailers who sell products that fall at extreme ends of the market, whether very healthy, very indulgent, or very luxurious, might counterintuitively benefit from offering even more extreme options in instances where consumers are likely to have a conflicting incidental goal, perhaps due to the time of day or location of the shop. For example, prior research has found that consumers are more likely to have health goals in the morning, when they are not yet depleted from choices made throughout the day (vs. at night; Baumeister 2002). A doughnut shop that sells only unhealthy options might then consider offering

an extra-indulgent donut in the morning. Similarly, a store that sells healthy options might benefit from offering extra healthy options if the store is located near a candy store, for example, which could incidentally activate the goal to indulge. Such retailers might even consider making extreme options easier to justify, perhaps by calling attention to limited quantities or limited time to buy. Further, our research offers insight into a potential reason many sellers offer assortments focused on satisfying only one choice-set goal. For example, dessert trays often avoid including healthy options. While there are many factors contributing to assortment decisions, one reason might be that consumers are more likely to choose the most extreme, and oftentimes more expensive, options from such choice sets, particularly when a conflicting incidental goal is active.

On the other hand, consumers looking to improve the likelihood of attaining their incidental goals might benefit from being made aware of and trying to counteract their effect on the need to justify one's choices. For example, if consumers could instead make a conscious attempt to search for reasons to justify the "lesser of two evils" option, the pattern might reverse. Further, our research suggests that in order to successfully pursue incidental goals, people need to think carefully not only about which options they choose from a given choice set, but also about which choice sets they will likely encounter. Dieters who will be at work late should anticipate that they may be faced with limited, unhealthy choice alternatives should they become hungry (e.g., a choice between vending machine options). In turn, they could take steps a priori to ensure healthier options might be available, in order to obviate a forced choice among goal conflicting options and the potential for the need for justification to sway preferences toward selection of the most indulgent snack. While personal choices may evoke a sense of individual agency, people may not consciously take responsibility for or thoughtfully consider the choice sets they will face in any given day and thus end up in situations where their incidental goals ironically cause them to make counterproductive decisions. Understanding the effects demonstrated in this research could motivate people to consider their choice sets in advance and avoid counterproductive patterns.

In conclusion, the findings presented here offer a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the decision processes and outcomes that result when consumers' incidental goals conflict with the choice alternatives they face. While further research is necessary to test the boundaries of these effects, we believe the current set of experiments offer a

meaningful first step toward understanding how goal conflict under these conditions affects choice.

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