



Work more and indulge more: Exploring the self-licensing effect of hard work on likelihood to purchase hedonic products



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Self-licensing
Hard-work
Hedonic product
Thinking orientation

ABSTRACT

There is a common belief that hard work is a critical virtue to be possessed. Although there is ample evidence on the benefits of hard-work across different contexts, little research has been examined to explore the potential negative consequences of hard-work (except for the case of burn-out). This research aims to address this interesting void and explore how hard work can license consumers to indulge, increasing their likelihood to purchase hedonic products. Across two studies, it is found that consumers who perceive their hard work have a higher likelihood to purchase hedonic products (e.g., chocolate bar) even when they experience less desirable outcome. However, when consumers have outcome-focused (vs. process-focused) orientation, this self-licensing effect will disappear. These findings can be beneficial for firms and marketers to effectively develop marketing strategies, especially in promoting hedonic products and services.

1. Introduction

In this world, hard work is commonly believed as one of the most important factors to achieve success (Geren, 2011). Indeed, a positive work ethic is built on the concept of hard work (Cherrington, 1980; Weber, 1998). Thus, the general public will typically consent that hard work is a virtue to be possessed. Consistent with this notion, there is ample evidence concerning the positive outcomes of hard work across different contexts (López, 2001; Rau and Durand, 2000). Unfortunately, the extant literature is surprisingly silent regarding the possibility that hard work can lead to negative consequences (except for the case of burnout) (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Sulea et al., 2015). Building on the literature on the self-licensing effect, this paper aims to address this interesting gap in the literature by exploring how hard work can license individuals to indulge.

In the current research, hard work is defined as the perceived effort of individuals to attain a goal. This research proposes that consumers who perceive their hard work are more likely to license themselves, thus increasing their likelihood to purchase hedonic products. Across two studies, this research tests the prediction and further identifies a boundary condition of the predicted effect. Study 1 shows that consumers are more likely to purchase hedonic products (e.g., chocolate bar) even when they experience less desirable outcomes. Extending Study 1, Study 2 demonstrates that the predicted effect only occurs when consumers have process-focused (vs. outcome-focused) orientation.

This paper has three important contributions. First, much research

in the self-licensing literature emphasizes how individuals can license their indulgence following desirable outcomes. The current research adds understanding in the literature by showing that the self-licensing effect can occur even when individuals experience less desirable outcomes. Second, this paper identifies a boundary condition of the predicted effect. That is, the self-licensing effect only emerges when individuals possess process-focused, rather than outcome-focused, orientation. Finally, the implications of this research can be beneficial for firms and marketers to develop effective marketing strategies to promote hedonic products and services.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Perceived effort and self-licensing effects

Every individual makes decisions based on specific reasons. In fact, because individuals make trade-offs in each choice, they need to consider their reasons when making decisions (Shafir et al., 1993); hence, they are more likely to make a choice when it is easily justified (De Witt Huberts et al., 2012). Building on this premise, prior research has showed that individuals are more likely to indulge and engage in hedonic behaviors when they have a reason to justify the behaviors (Kivetz and Simonson, 2002; Xu and Schwarz, 2009). Indeed, although individuals are naturally inclined to indulge, they are less likely to do so when there is no justification (Okada, 2005). Thus, indulgence does not always imply the failure of exercising self-control; it can also mean that the reasons to indulge are simply available (De Witt Huberts et al.,

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2016.10.012>

Received 16 June 2016; Received in revised form 14 September 2016; Accepted 20 October 2016
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2012, 2014).

This justification-based account typically emerges from prior actions and influences subsequent behaviors; this phenomenon is commonly known as the “self-licensing” effect. Previous studies have found that being “good” can license individuals to indulge in bad behaviors (Khan and Dhar, 2006; Merritt et al., 2010). For instance, engaging in an altruistic behavior can reduce the willingness to donate (Khan and Dhar, 2006). The literal action of cleaning oneself can license a harsher moral judgment (Zhong et al., 2010). Also, restraining a prior impulse purchase intention can lead to indulgence in the subsequent purchase opportunities (Mukhopadhyay and Johar, 2009). Finally, purchasing green products can decrease subsequent altruistic behaviors and increase unethical behaviors (Mazar and Zhong, 2010).

Prior studies have suggested that self-licensing effect typically occurs when the self-esteem of individuals is inflated (De Witt Huberts et al., 2012). For example, when consumers recall or imagine a past or future behavior that boosts their self-esteem (e.g., achievement, moral action), they feel that they deserve to indulge or even engage in an immoral behavior as a form of rewards (Khan and Dhar, 2006; Merritt et al., 2010; Strahilevitz and Myers, 1998). Thus, consumers who imagine themselves volunteering and doing community service are more likely to choose luxurious item over utilitarian one (e.g., designer jeans vs. a vacuum cleaner) (Khan and Dhar, 2006).

Self-licensing effect can also emerge when consumers perceive their exerted effort or hard work (Kivetz and Simonson, 2002; Kivetz and Zheng, 2006; Mukhopadhyay and Johar, 2009). For example, consumers prefer loyalty programs with a luxury (vs. utilitarian) reward when greater effort is needed to attain that reward (Kivetz and Simonson, 2002). Similarly, refraining from a purchase temptation at one point of time will make consumers indulge at the subsequent purchase opportunity (as a form of rewards) (Mukhopadhyay and Johar, 2009). These effects can occur because the exerted effort create a belief in consumers’ mind that they have progressed in approaching their goals (Fishbach and Dhar, 2005).

Although previous studies have established that consumers can indulge following desirable outcomes (e.g., achievement, past good deed, approaching a goal), there is a caveat on the extant literature. Specifically, it is still unclear whether self-licensing can occur when individuals experience less desirable outcomes (e.g., failure to attain a goal) (De Witt Huberts et al., 2014). The current research aims to address this important gap in the literature by examining the situations under which individuals experience different outcomes. It is expected that when consumers experience a desirable outcome, they are more likely to license and indulge in subsequent hedonic behaviors (e.g., likelihood to purchase hedonic products) because of this desirable outcome (i.e., the “classic” self-licensing effect).

However, this research further proposes that it is still possible for consumers to license their indulgence even when they experience less desirable outcomes, given that they perceive their exerted effort. Prior research has provided some evidence to support this premise. For example, there is a common belief that individuals deserve a “good life” after hard work, regardless of the outcome of their effort (Weber, 1998). Recent research also indicates how negative events can lead individuals to make meaning and find justifications from those situations (Park, 2010; Updegraff et al., 2008). In particular, finding justification is likely to be simpler when individuals have personal control over the situation (e.g., perceive their exerted effort) (Anderson et al., 2013). These findings suggest that when consumers have exerted a significant effort, they are more likely to use that effort as a justification despite the less desirable outcomes. Therefore, this paper proposes a significant interactive effect between perceived effort and outcome conditions, such that:

H1: The likelihood to purchase hedonic products will be higher in the hard work condition than in the control condition among consumers who experience a *less* successful outcome (but *not* among those who

experience a successful outcome).

2.2. The moderating role of thinking orientations

This section discusses a potential boundary condition of the hypothesis. In particular, this paper posits that different thinking orientations (i.e., process-focused vs. outcome-focused) (Pham and Taylor, 1999) can moderate the predicted self-licensing effect. Individuals with an outcome-focused orientation are those who envision the outcome they desire to achieve. In contrast, individuals with a process-focused orientation are those who simulate a process to achieve a desired goal (Masaaki, 1986; Pham and Taylor, 1999). These definitions suggest that individuals with process-focused (vs. outcome-focused) orientation will put more value on the process of goal pursuit that they have gone through, rather than on the outcome of that goal pursuit.

Because consumers who experience less desirable outcomes tend to use their exerted effort as a justification, they would also more likely to focus on the *process* of goal pursuit. In other words, the predicted self-licensing effect should be attenuated when consumers, who experience less desirable outcomes, focus on the outcome of goal pursuit. Thus, this research predicts a significant interactive effect between perceived effort and think orientations, given that the outcome is less desirable. Formally:

H2: The likelihood to purchase hedonic products will be higher in the hard work condition than in the control condition among consumers who have process-focused (but *not* among those who have outcome-focused) orientation.

3. Study 1

3.1. Methods

Study 1 aims to test H1. This study employed a 2 (effort: hard work, control) × 2 (outcome: successful, less successful) between-subjects design. One hundred and twenty participants (53% male, $M_{\text{age}}=28.8$, $SD=6.15$) were recruited from the Indonesian online panel and asked to complete a survey. This survey consists of two (ostensibly) unrelated tasks. The first task aims to evoke different perceived efforts and outcomes on participants, while the second task serves to measure whether participants are more willing to purchase hedonic products (i.e., the self-licensing effect).

In the first task, participants read a short story (around 500 words) about a student who has to face a difficult final exam. This story was adapted from previous research (Griskevicius, Shiota, and Nowlis, 2010; Winterich and Haws, 2011). Hard work (vs. control) condition was manipulated by adding a more detailed description in the story of how this student studies really hard for the exam. Two different scores of the exam were used to manipulate the outcome condition: 97/100 (successful condition) or 57/100 (less successful condition).

In the second task, participants were told that there is a new premium-priced chocolate bar (i.e., Green & Black Chocolate) that will be marketed soon in Indonesia. Chocolate bar was selected because prior studies have established chocolate as product with hedonic attributes (Garg et al., 2007; Strahilevitz and Myers, 1998; Winterich and Barone, 2011). Green & Black Chocolate, a relatively unknown chocolate brand in Indonesia, was also used to control for potential confounding effect of brand familiarity. For the dependent variable, participants were asked to evaluate an ad from that chocolate brand and indicate their likelihood to purchase that chocolate, after viewing the ad, on an 8-point scale (1 = not at all, 8 = extremely likely).

As manipulation checks, they were asked to evaluate the story and rate their perceived effort (“In the story you have read, how hard do you feel you have studied for the exam?”) and perceived outcome (“Considering the score you got, how successful do you feel you are

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