

Enhancing self-control in consumer decisions

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Researchers from many disciplines have studied the underlying processes of self-control in which one must override an immediate desire or urge to reach longer-term goals. Within consumer behavior, such decisions often involve the domains of spending and eating. In this review, I discuss recent research on strategies and interventions that have been tested to help enhance self-control, organizing these around their primary temporal perspective (i.e. future-, present-, or past-focused). I suggest possibilities for future research and emphasize that situational and individual differences (particularly in self-control) can interact to determine the effectiveness of consumer self-control strategies.

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As with many other aspects of life, our role as consumers often requires the exercise of self-control. In perhaps no other domains does the inability to resist temptations loom larger than in spending and eating. Hoch and Loewenstein were among the first to specifically address the notion of self-control within a consumer domain [1^{••}]. The bottom line is that when resources are *limited* (e.g. financial resources for most consumers; amount of food that can or should be consumed), tradeoffs requiring self-control are necessary. Yet, navigating these trade-offs is no easy task as the visceral influences in the form of the latest technology or the smell of those fresh-baked cookies that surround us as consumers can be nearly overwhelming [2]. Furthermore, Baumeister and colleagues have shown that the depleting nature of life taxes one's regulatory resources [3], leaving temptation difficult to resist. So, what are well-intentioned consumers to do? Herein I highlight recent research on understanding strategies and interventions to *improve* self-control.

Strategies to enhance consumption self-control

Consumer self-control dilemmas emerge as a struggle between willpower and desire that arises from preferences that are inconsistent with respect to time [1^{••}]. Consumer self-control research largely assumes that consumers prefer financial security and good health in the long run, goals that require self-control in the present rather than a care-free eat, drink, spend, and be merry approach to living. This ability to exercise self-control differs among individuals at both the general level [4] and specific to spending and eating [5,6]. Numerous self-control strategies can be helpful regardless of consumers' natural self-control levels; many of these strategies involve three key components of self-regulation: firstly, developing goals; secondly, taking actions to achieve these goals; and thirdly, monitoring one's progress vis-a-vis these goals [5,7]. While Hoch and Loewenstein classify self-control strategies as either desire reducing or willpower enhancing [1^{••}], I draw upon the underlying time inconsistent preferences and introduce a temporal-based categorization scheme, recognizing that current self-control can be impacted by thinking to the future; re-construing the present; and/or reflecting on the past. Herein, I organize and highlight examples of strategies emphasizing each of these primary temporal perspectives.

Thinking to the future

One class of self-control strategies involves focusing one's attention on the future. Indeed, many self-control strategies involve thinking ahead to the benefits to be received from prudent behaviors [8,9] or the exact ways in which one will handle temptations when they arise, consistent with the notion of implementation intentions, which promote attentional control and fend against distractions [10,11[•]].

Planning. Some level of forward thinking about what individuals will do to meet their valued goals is essential. For example, having standards and making plans — such as a formal or informal budget or diet and exercise plan — is central to enacting self-control. Even something as simple as making a list has been associated with fewer impulse purchases [13]. Relatedly, Wertenbroch demonstrated that consumers can use precommitment to purposefully ration purchase quantities of vices in an effort to restrict their future consumption by making additional consumption more costly [14], and using self-imposed costly deadlines to overcome procrastination [15]. Interestingly, consumers who believe that self-control is malleable but limited set fewer goals [12] which can increase

the effectiveness of the goals set, so both the nature and number of goals varies across consumers.

Considering future outcomes. While planning helps consumers think about how to meet their goals, considering what the future might hold helps to motivate and refine these plans. Considering potential future outcomes relies on one's ability to transcend the current situation and reflect on one's goals. This future can be considered in many different ways. Fujita *et al.* [8^{*}] (also see [16]) showed that higher level construal (e.g. thinking about 'why' I want to maintain good health) is associated with greater self-control than low-level consideration (how do I maintain good health?) suggesting that thinking about *why* one values future outcomes over present ones is more effective at enhancing self-control than thinking about *how* one will accomplish their goals. Moreover, Nenkov and colleagues demonstrated important differences in the propensity to elaborate on potential outcomes (EPO) of one's present decisions (based on prior time perspective research [17–19]), both positive and negative, with higher levels of EPO being associated with greater self-control [9]. Additional research findings showed that the fluency created from engaging in negative outcome elaboration at a concrete level and positive outcome elaboration at an abstract level enhanced self-control [20^{*}]. Further, the effectiveness of the specific ways the future is construed appears to be influenced by individual differences in self-control. Encouragingly, external prompts to consider future outcomes were shown to be effective primarily for those low in self-control [5], while essentially being neutral for those high in self-control. Moreover, focusing on the more immediate benefits of a virtue (e.g. good tasting dental floss) increased its usage for those lower in self-control, whereas a future benefit focus was more effective for those higher in self-control [21].

In addition to simply thinking about goals one should achieve in the future, one must also care about accomplishing these goals. Bartels and Urminsky [22] show that motivating self-control with a focus on one's future self only reduces spending when consumers are aware of the trade-offs (e.g. not being able to retire early) that will occur in the future in light of their current decisions and truly believe that these future trade-offs are important. This motivational component is also highlighted by the increased effectiveness of optimistic forward thinking when goal congruent actions are viewed as commitment to the goal (i.e. I must really think that this goal is important) rather than goal progress (i.e. I am getting closer to achieving this goal) [23].

Re-construing the present

Many self-control strategies involve changing one's present environment or perceptions of this environment [24]. I highlight the use of avoidance of tempting environments

as well as strategies to manage the contextual and social influences in one's present environment.

Avoidance. An avoidance strategy entails limiting one's exposure to temptation [1^{••}], and it may be recommended because, for example, having a small bite of something appetitive has been shown to whet the appetite for more, decreasing subsequent self-control [25]. While avoiding particularly alluring retail stores or bakeries may be feasible, complete avoidance of spending and eating is next to impossible [26^{••}]. Therefore, being strategic about one's avoidance is most useful. For example, avoiding an alluring environment when one is depleted can be an effective strategy [7,27]. Less extreme versions of avoidance might include limiting the aisles one goes down in the grocery store, which was shown to be associated with fewer impulse purchases [13]. Intriguingly, Hofmann *et al.* suggest that those with greater self-control experience desire less strongly because they naturally avoid circumstances likely to evoke high levels of desire [26^{••}].

Others examine ways to make available temptations less alluring, providing more of a psychological rather than a physical avoidance. For example, counteractive construal strategies entail viewing the present temptation as more damaging to goal pursuit than it actually is, such as when one overestimates the calories contained in an available tempting food item [28]. In addition, other mental reconstrual techniques such as thinking of marshmallows as clouds, can effectively reduce the allure of a temptation when physical avoidance is not feasible [29]. Such reconsideration strategies may well depend on one's awareness of their surroundings as discussed next.

Awareness of contextual factors. Previous research has emphasized how external factors such as portion size or distractions influence the quantity that one eats. Wansink and others have provided an abundance of present-focused strategies useful for structuring one's consumption contexts to control food consumption and guard against the biases that are particularly influential when monitoring is not high. In fact, underlying most of their recommendations is an emphasis on enhancing attention to or monitoring of behavior, in order to reduce 'mindless eating' [30]. Recognizing that one has a tendency to overconsume mindlessly can help in using such approaches as eliminating distractions (perhaps turning off that TV) [31]; eating off of smaller plates [32]; reducing the variety of foods consumed in a single setting [33]; and choosing vice and virtue foods together to help one realize that relative quantities of each matters [34], all of which have been shown to reduce unhealthy consumption.

Further, emotional states play a role. For example, 'retail therapy' represents a strategic effort to improve mood

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