

Research Article

Haunts or helps from the past: Understanding the effect of recall on current self-control☆

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Abstract

Conventional wisdom suggests that remembering our past successes or failures can help us make better decisions in the present. But how successful is this practice in the domain of self-control? Our work examines how the content of consumers' recollections (past self-control successes versus failures) and the subjective difficulty with which this content comes to mind (easily or with difficulty) jointly shape consumers' self-control decisions. When successes are easy to recall, people display more self-control than when they have difficulty recalling successes. However, recalling failures prompts indulgence regardless of its difficulty. We suggest that these differences in behavior may exist because recalling failures has substantially different affective and cognitive consequences than does recalling successes. Consistent with this theory, we demonstrate that external cues toward high or low self-certainty moderate the effects of recall on self-control. Taken together, this work enhances our understanding of self-control, self-perceptions, and metacognition.

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Consumers often use their past behaviors to guide their present decisions (Albarracín & Wyer, 2000; Bentler & Speckart, 1981; Ouellette & Wood, 1998; Taylor, 1975). Certainly, recollection of one's past can be a valuable source of information (Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 1999), as reflected in practice. For instance, the Oregon State Addictions & Mental Health department's gambling addiction services specifically stress that remembering past gambling experiences will help individuals cope with their

destructive tendencies (Oregon.gov). Self-help pamphlets by the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention as well as the Food Addicts organization also suggest that individuals should spend time reflecting on their past lapses in overeating or failures to exercise to ensure better future behaviors (Food Addicts, 2012). Clinical research by Prochaska, DiClemente, and Norcross (1992) suggests that indeed, many addicts tend to contemplate their past relapses in an effort to be better prepared for similar challenges.

But does recalling our past always help us make the virtuous decisions that are likely to lead to a better long-term future? We suggest that recommendations to use recall to shape present behavior should be tempered, as this question requires a more complex answer than can be captured in a simple yes or no. Rather, we argue that the effectiveness of recall in improving our present self-regulation depends on 1) what we recall (i.e., the content of our recall) and 2) how easily the recalled content comes

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to mind (i.e., the metacognitive experience associated with our recall). In fact, we find that individuals only show better self-control following reflection on their past under very specific conditions—when they recall their past self-control successes easily. Doing so leads consumers to have confident beliefs about their own self-control ability, which then shape their current decisions. By contrast, having difficulty recalling successes leads to significantly weaker self-control. Further, if consumers recall failures, they tend to engage in equivalent levels of indulgence regardless of recall difficulty.

Practically, for consumers and individuals trying to develop interventions to help them, our work suggests that reflecting on the past is often undesirable. Theoretically, our consideration of the metacognitive experience of recall (i.e., difficulty of recall) builds on the work of Mukhopadhyay, Sengupta, and Ramanathan (2008), who examined how the content of recall of past food-related temptations affects consumers' current indulgence differently depending on their chronic impulsivity. Acknowledging and extending this research, we show that ease-of-retrieval effects are asymmetric in the case of recalling self-control behaviors. Rather, the ease-of-retrieval effects on self-control emerge only when one recalls self-control successes but *not* when failures are recalled. Thus, we respond to Ruder and Bless' call to delineate the limiting conditions of the ease of retrieval effects (2003), and raise additional questions for future research in this area.

Conceptual framework

How does recall influence consumers' decisions?

The literature on self-control provides some hints that recall is not always a sure route to success. For example, Mukhopadhyay et al. (2008) find that impulsive consumers succumb to current temptations if they recall having resisted a similar temptation in the past and vice versa, but in contrast, non-impulsive individuals show behavioral consistency—they resist (succumb to) temptations if they recall having resisted (succumbed) in the past.

However, other research suggests that the content of recall may not fully explain the effect of recollection on self-control. Importantly, this work notes that recall provides individuals with two separate sources of information: the content of the recollections and the subjective experience of ease or difficulty with which the content comes to mind, which jointly shape current judgments and decisions (Jacoby, Kelley, & Dywan, 1989; Schwarz, 1998, 2004; Schwarz & Vaughn, 2002; Schwarz et al., 1991).

Given these findings, we suggest that the work of Mukhopadhyay et al. (2008) can be meaningfully extended by examining the interactive influence of both content of recollections and the metacognitive experience accompanying recall on consumers' self-control. We next present a framework that integrates the two sources of information (content and metacognition) and predicts the self-control outcomes resulting from their interactive influence.

The interplay of content of recalled acts and ease of recall on self-control

Our conceptual framework (see Fig. 1) begins with the argument the recall of successes and failures cue different affective and cognitive consequences.

Recall of self-control successes

We first suggest that the retrieval of successes at self-regulation may generate a positive mood in consumers. Past research suggests that retrieving positive information about the self can successfully operate as a mood-enhancing strategy (Josephson, Singer, & Salovey, 1996; Showers & Kling, 1996).

The recall of successes will also have important cognitive consequences for consumers. Specifically, we argue that recalling self-control successes should encourage positive perceptions of one's self-control ability, since successes contribute to the building of a sound belief in one's ability (Bandura, 1998). We ground this prediction in past analytical work by Battaglini, Bénabou, and Tirole (2005), who propose that people often attempt to infer their own ability to resist temptations from their past actions. Importantly, consumers perceive their past choices as “indicative of ‘what kind of person’ they are” (Bénabou & Tirole, 2004; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2012; Prelec & Bodner, 2003). Thus, recalling past success might be predicted to simply tell consumers that they are good at self-control.

However, given that positive mood states have been found to increase reliance on the ease-of-retrieval heuristic (Bless & Schwarz, 1999; Schwarz et al., 1991), it also follows that the content of their recollections will not fully explain consumers' self-perceptions. Rather, the metacognitive information that accompanies this recall will also affect their perceptions of their self-control ability. Classic examples of such effects can be seen in Schwarz et al. (1991). Here, the authors showed that participants who had to recall 12 instances of assertive (unassertive) behavior and thus experienced greater retrieval difficulty perceived themselves as less assertive (less unassertive) than participants who had to recall six such instances and found the retrieval easy. That is, retrieval difficulty qualified the recall content to such an extent that participants' judgments were the opposite of the conclusions drawn from the content that was brought to mind (Schwarz et al., 1991). Based upon this research, we therefore propose that individuals who find it easy to recall their self-control successes will perceive themselves as better at self-control than those whose recall of successes is difficult.

Finally, the positive mood state resulting from the recall of successes will be associated with increased confidence in individuals' currently-held self-perceptions, which will increase reliance on these thoughts in subsequent judgments and decisions (Briñol, Petty, & Barden, 2007; Clore & Huntsinger, 2007). Therefore, consumers recalling successes will use their self-perceptions to guide their current self-control behaviors. In sum, we predict that consumers will indulge more after difficult recall of successes than after easy recall of successes, because they will perceive themselves as being worse at self-control in the former than in the latter case.

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