

Research Article

# The benefits of behaving badly on occasion: Successful regulation by planned hedonic deviations ☆

Rita Coelho do Vale <sup>a,\*</sup>, Rik Pieters <sup>b,1</sup>, Marcel Zeelenberg <sup>b,2</sup>

<sup>a</sup> UCP, Católica Lisbon — School of Business and Economics, Portugal

<sup>b</sup> Tilburg University, P.O. Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands

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## Abstract

This research tests the idea that goal-pursuit that requires extended inhibition of desires, such as weight loss and financial saving, can benefit from including planned hedonic deviations in the goal-striving plan. Two controlled experiments (simulated and real dieting) demonstrate that including planned goal deviations during extended goal striving, compared with following a straight and rigid goal striving process, (1) helps regain self-regulatory resources, (2) helps maintain consumers' motivation to pursue with regulatory tasks, and (3) has a positive impact on affect experienced, which all contribute to facilitate long-term goal-adherence. A third study, conducted with current goal-strivers provides further evidence of the benefits of planned hedonic deviations for goal pursuit across a variety of goals. This reveals that it may be beneficial for long-term goal-success to occasionally be bad, as long it is planned.

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## Introduction

Is it smart to have a chocolate cake when you are on a diet to lose weight? Is it a good idea to spend money on something feeble today when you are trying hard to save money for a larger purchase next month? Most people would answer these questions negatively, thinking they should systematically and consistently try to control the desires that conflict with

an important current goal (Dholakia, Gopinath, Bagozzi, & Natarajan, 2006). The Overeaters Anonymous Organization (1995), for example, also stresses the importance of sustained commitment to abstinence for goal attainment, and several diet plans identify “bad foods” that should be avoided at all times (e.g., Atkins diet, south beach diet). The belief that hedonic deviations from the focal goal should be avoided since they are detrimental to goal attainment appears to be general (Fishbach & Shah, 2006).

In contrast to the general belief that consumers should categorically resist goal deviations, we propose that including *planned hedonic* goal-deviation activities a priori in the initial goal implementation plans may actually be beneficial for long term goal attainment, such as by occasionally having a chocolate cake when on a diet. These planned goal deviations can help consumers' motivation to persist in goal-striving, improve emotional experience, and help consumers regain self-regulatory resources, which altogether may ultimately reduce the likelihood of goal desistance. Support for this idea

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\* Corresponding author at: Católica Lisbon School of Business and Economics, Catholic University of Portugal (UCP), Palma de Cima, 1649-023 Lisbon, Portugal. Tel: +351 21 7214270, fax: +351 21 7270252.

E-mail addresses: [ritacoelhovale@icloud.com](mailto:ritacoelhovale@icloud.com) (R. Coelho do Vale), [f.g.m.pieters@uvt.nl](mailto:f.g.m.pieters@uvt.nl) (R. Pieters), [marcel@uvt.nl](mailto:marcel@uvt.nl) (M. Zeelenberg).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +31 13 4663256; fax: +31 13 4668354.

<sup>2</sup> Tel.: +31 13 4668276; fax: +31 13 4662067.

would reveal that it may be good in the long run to behave “badly” on occasion, when it is planned.

Despite the prevalence of long-term goal striving activities among consumers, and frequent failures to attain the final goals, and notwithstanding a burgeoning literature on these important topics, few studies have explored *how* goal striving can be managed over time to maximize consumers’ goal-adherence and final goal attainment. Much extant research has focused on identifying factors that promote initiation of goal striving and factors that lead to failure (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996; Louro, Pieters, & Zeelenberg, 2007; Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2005; Vohs & Heatherton, 2000). But as pointed out by Higgins and Scholer (2009, p. 100) “it is important to consider not only the outcomes of goal pursuit but also the process and, especially, *strength of engagement in the goal pursuit activity itself*.” In line with this, the present research investigates a specific strategy that consumers can follow during goal pursuit to enhance the likelihood of final goal attainment: including *planned* hedonic deviations during goal pursuit.

### Benefits of planned hedonic goal deviations

When consumers share the belief that any deviation from current goal striving represents a failure, they may end up overemphasizing any initial lapse, such that even small misalignments result in total abandonment of the goal (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996). For example, as mentioned by Wansink and Chandon (2014) when referring to dieting rules, these can be easily disrupted by any dietary violations such as succumbing to a “forbidden” hedonic food. So, it is not just a matter of understanding how to overcome the initial reluctance to initiate the proper behavior, because many goals require people to keep striving for long periods of time (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2009). And for this to happen, people may need specific (and perhaps even counterintuitive) strategies to cope with the challenges during goal striving.

We propose that goals that involve sustained inhibition of behavior—such as dieting—may actually benefit from *planned* hedonic deviations from current goal pursuit. Of course, it is obvious to “take five” after having worked long hours, but that is not what we mean here. We argue that planned goal deviations may be needed when trying to persist in the long-run and to not quit from current goal pursuit. This can be spending money on occasion when the long-term goal is to save, or sometimes consuming high caloric foods when the long-term goal is to lose weight. Importantly, because a conflict may arise between what consumers believe to be the advantageous course of action and what their inner resources need in order to allow successful goal pursuit, these beliefs to abstain completely, so-called zero-tolerance beliefs, may end up increasing the likelihood of final goal failure. This is relevant because without engagement, persistence, and adherence to the goals, these will not be strived for overtime (Higgins & Scholer, 2009).

We know that beliefs about the instrumentality of particular actions (Boonzaier, McClure, & Sutton, 2005) can affect the way that consumers act and plan actions to attain their goals (Martijn, Tenbült, Merckelbach, Dreezens, & De Vries, 2002).

For instance, beliefs about the malleability and limited nature of self-regulatory resources have been shown to influence consumers’ goal-directed behavior independently of the actual resources available (Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2005). Also consumers’ erroneous beliefs about the benefits of adding healthy options to a meal, led to an underestimation of the calorie content of meals containing both healthy and unhealthy items, which led to weight gain rather than loss (Chernev, 2011). When consumers try to behave according to zero-tolerance beliefs, resources are drained and motivation to sustain striving wanes (Heatherton & Vohs, 1998). If consumers are emotionally strained or feel that goal-related actions are effortful, as when trying to diet or save money, their motivation to reach the end goal is likely to decrease (Touré-Tillery & Fishbach, 2011). Moreover, people tend to increase the value of objects or options that are eliminated from their choice set (Brehm, 1966; Carmon, Wertenbroch, & Zeelenberg, 2003). As a case in point, including warning labels about the fat content of products *increased* rather than *decreased* the interest to taste a supposedly “bad” product (Bushman, 2006; Higgins & Scholer, 2009). Thus, we reason that when consumers are not given the possibility to engage occasionally in “forbidden fruit” activities and when they believe that any goal-deviation will result in a goal-failure, they might actually give up goal striving altogether. Thus, it seems important to include in the initial plan the possibility of occasional hedonic goal deviations. This will likely reduce the value attributed to the activities/products being inhibited, as also the possible engagement on occasion on some of those activities will not be attributed to any internal failure of lack of self-regulation but instead as a mean to reach an end. Indirect support for this idea comes from Poynor and Haws (2009) who found that creating broader categories of goal-consistent actions can help consumers to stick to their goals. We speculate that three factors contribute to the effectiveness of planned goal deviations.

First, planned goal deviations are likely to help consumers retain or regain self-regulatory resources. People are more likely to succumb to various flawed decision strategies when lacking self-regulatory resources (Baumeister, Sparks, Stillman, & Vohs, 2008). For instance, although dieters can resist temptations in the short term, they tend to fail on subsequent tasks to resist temptations, because of the reduced resources for self-regulation (Vohs & Heatherton, 2000). If that is the case, strategies are needed that help dieters to persist (Wansink & Chandon, 2014). For example, exertion of self-control in tasks of varied nature has been shown to reduce blood glucose levels and that restoring the level of glucose to a sufficient level typically improves self-control (Gailliot & Baumeister, 2007). Thus, it seems even counterintuitive to ask millions of people every day to start dieting for long periods of time without giving them the possibility of restoring their ability to exert self-control during the long goal-striving periods typically involved in dieting.

Temporal deviations from goal pursuit, because of the hedonic value of these activities, may then help consumers to regain self-regulatory resources and allow them to proceed with goal-oriented activities, avoiding goal desistance. It is however crucial that the hedonic goal deviations *are planned* because unplanned goal deviations might easily be interpreted as

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