



# Absorbed in the moment? An investigation of procrastination, absorption and cognitive failures



Fuschia M. Sirois\*

Health and Well-being Laboratory, Department of Psychology, Bishop's University, 2600 College St., Sherbrooke, Quebec, Canada  
Centre de recherche sur le vieillissement, Sherbrooke, Quebec, Canada

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 27 April 2014

Received in revised form 11 June 2014

Accepted 7 July 2014

Available online 10 August 2014

### Keywords:

Procrastination

Absorption

Cognitive failures

Anxiety

Mood-regulation

## ABSTRACT

Mood-repair conceptualizations of procrastination suggest that regulation of immediate mood is prioritized over instrumental action towards goals. The aim of the current research was to examine how and why absorption – a mindset reflecting a responsiveness to engaging stimuli – may account for procrastinators' tendency to focus on immediately rewarding activities at the cost of their long term goals, and the cognitive implications of being absorbed in the moment. Across two student samples (Study 1:  $N = 103$ ; Study 2:  $N = 339$ ) procrastination was associated with absorption. A bootstrapping analysis of the indirect effects of procrastination on absorption through state anxiety in Study 1 was significant supporting the hypothesized role of absorption as a vulnerability towards mood-regulating distractions for procrastinators. In Study 2 small but significant indirect effects of procrastination on cognitive failures through absorption emerged, supporting the proposition that absorption may have a cognitive toll for procrastinators. Taken together, these findings suggest a cognitive escape hypothesis to explain how procrastinators deal with negative moods, and provides new insights into the factors and processes that contribute to the self-regulation difficulties that characterize trait procrastination.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

As a problematic behavioral tendency that involves the unnecessary and voluntary delay of important intended tasks despite knowing one will be worse off for doing so (Steel, 2007), procrastination is receiving increased attention from researchers seeking to better understand its correlates and consequences. A recent theoretical review of the intra-personal processes underlying this form of self-regulation failure proposed that procrastination may be best understood as the prioritization of short-term mood regulation over long term goal achievement (Sirois & Pychyl, 2013). Indeed, a recent meta-analysis supports the notion that procrastinators have a temporal bias towards the present and away from the future which is due in part to their current negative mood states (Sirois, 2014a). In particular, procrastinators may turn their attention to tasks and experiences that are more immediately and emotionally rewarding as a way to regulate the negative mood surrounding tasks viewed as aversive or challenging (Blunt & Pychyl, 2000; Sirois & Pychyl, 2013). Although some present-focused mindsets such as mindfulness may facilitate self-regulation (Evans, Baer, &

Segerstrom, 2009), there is evidence that the present-focused mindset associated with procrastination promotes being “lost in the moment” and “giving into feel good” in a way that can derail rather than enhance self-regulation (Sirois & Tosti, 2012; Tice & Bratslavsky, 2000). These investigations converge with other research demonstrating that procrastination is associated with avoidant cognitive tendencies that promote immediate mood regulation at the expense of goal-oriented thinking (Sirois, 2004).

This account of the temporal mood regulation dynamics underlying procrastination suggests that mindsets that facilitate pleasurable escape from immediately distressing states and tasks may be important factors for understanding procrastination. Procrastination has been linked to having a hedonistic present time-orientation (Sirois, 2014a), and to having low levels of mindfulness (Sirois & Tosti, 2012). However, other related mindsets have not been fully investigated with respect to procrastination and its consequences. The purpose of the current research was to address this gap by examining the possible links between procrastination and absorption, a quality that reflects an openness and responsiveness to engaging stimuli (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974).

### 1.1. Absorption as an escapist quality

Originally introduced in the 1970's as a trait-like correlate of hypnotizability (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974), absorption is a quality

\* Address: Department of Psychology, Bishop's University, 2600 College St., Sherbrooke, Quebec J1M 1Z7, Canada.

E-mail address: [fsirois@ubishops.ca](mailto:fsirois@ubishops.ca)

reflecting an openness to experience cognitive and emotional alterations across different situations (Roche & McConkey, 1990). Absorption is conceptually related to openness to experience, and is linked most closely to the fantasy, esthetics, and feelings facets of openness (Glisky, Tataryn, Tobias, Kihlstrom, & McConkey, 1991). Moreover, this tendency to enter trans-like, timeless states can be experienced as dissociative or holistic in nature depending upon the situation and the other personal characteristics present (Roche & McConkey, 1990). Relevant for understanding of procrastination, researchers have also argued that absorption is closely related to dissociations in cognitive control and self-regulation processes (Jamieson, 2005).

With respect to escapist tendencies, absorption as it relates to cognitive alterations of a dissociative nature has been linked to fantasy proneness and daydreaming across several studies (Roche & McConkey, 1990). Links between absorption and behaviors reflecting escapist and immediately rewarding behaviors have also been demonstrated. For example, a study of impulse buying found that individuals who scored high on absorption were more influenced by environmental sensory cues and visual stimuli, and this heightened sensitivity made them more likely to override their will power and follow their desires to make impulse purchases (Youn & Faber, 2000). Among a sample of massively-multiplayer online (MMO) gamers, absorption and anxiety were found to be predictors of problematic Internet use, possibly because the immersive environment of MMO is especially appealing to individuals who are both anxious (and therefore avoidant oriented) and fantasy prone (Cole & Hooley, 2013).

### 1.2. Procrastination and absorption

There are several theoretical and empirical reasons to expect that procrastination may be associated with higher levels of absorption. According to Tellegen (1981) high absorption individuals have a mental set that is more experiential (e.g., image oriented and affectively toned) than low absorption individuals who tend to have an instrumental set (e.g., reality-oriented and practical). This distinction between experiential and instrumental mindsets has some conceptual similarities to Kuhl's (1985) distinction between state versus action orientations, with the former being associated with procrastination (Blunt & Pychyl, 1998). State orientation can interfere with action control by focusing attention on some past, present or future state rather than on taking instrumental action towards the implementation of an action plan (action orientation) (Kuhl, 1985). From the perspective of this parallel conceptualization, it is reasonable to expect that procrastination is associated with high levels of absorption.

Mood-repair conceptualizations of procrastination provide further support for the proposed link with absorption. Whether the negative states arise from the anticipation of having to complete an aversive task (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984), or from the negative self-evaluations that characterize procrastination (Flett, Stainton, Hewitt, Sherry, & Lay, 2012; Sirois, 2014b), becoming absorbed in more pleasurable activities and experiences may be one way to facilitate mood repair by providing a temporary escape from these negative emotions. This proposition is consistent with results from a meta-analysis which found a robust association between procrastination and maladaptive coping styles (average  $r = .27$ ), including avoidant coping (Kitner & Sirois, 2013). Absorption may also heighten sensitivity and responsiveness to goal derailing situational cues, as procrastination is associated with vulnerability to situational temptations (Dewitte & Schouwenburg, 2002; Sirois & Giguère, 2013). Finally, procrastination is a known correlate of problematic Internet behavior including "cyberslacking" (LaVoie & Pychyl, 2001; Thatcher, Wretschko, & Fridjhon, 2008), a behavior

that can serve a mood-regulating function and that is also frequent among individuals high in absorption (Cole & Hooley, 2013).

### 1.3. The present research

Together this theory and research provide support for the proposition that procrastination may be linked to higher levels of absorption, and that absorption is a quality that may account for the procrastinators' susceptibility to be distracted by more pleasurable activities as a means for dealing with negative mood states related to the completion of a challenging or aversive task. The aim of the current research was to test this hypothesis across two studies and to examine why absorption may be linked to procrastination, as well as the possible cognitive regulation implications for procrastinators of being absorbed in the moment. From a mood repair perspective, the higher levels of state anxiety associated with procrastination (Flett, Blankstein, & Martin, 1995), may explain the link between procrastination and absorption. Given the known links between absorption and anxiety (e.g., Wolfradt & Meyer, 1998) this explanation seems plausible. Study 1 examined this hypothesis with a mediation analysis of the indirect effects of procrastination on absorption through state anxiety. However, it is also possible that the proposed link between procrastination and absorption varies as a function of anxiety. A moderation analysis was therefore conducted to test this alternative hypothesis.

In the context of procrastination, it is likely that absorption reflects cognitive alterations of a dissociative nature that facilitate escape from negative mood. From this perspective it is possible that there are cognitive costs to procrastinators who tend to become absorbed in their more pleasurable distractions. There is evidence that for high-absorption individuals, external attentional demands are not compatible with their preferred experiential mindset which tends to favor effortless, internal events (Roche & McConkey, 1990). This preference may manifest as a tendency towards cognitive failures – minor lapses in memory, attentional, perceptual, and action-related capacities that can further compromise self-regulation (Broadbent, Cooper, FitzGerald, & Parkes, 1982). Indeed, procrastination is known to be linked to deficits in executive functioning which includes working memory and task monitoring (Rabin, Fogel, & Nutter-Upham, 2011). Study 2 sought to replicate and extend Study 1 by examining the link between procrastination and absorption using an alternative version of the absorption scale, and by testing the implications of procrastination on cognitive functioning through absorption with a mediation analysis to better understand the costs of absorption for trait procrastinators.

## 2. Study 1

### 2.1. Methods

#### 2.1.1. Participants and procedure

Following clearance from the university research ethics board, 103 (Mean age = 20.25, SD = 3.7, 70.9% female) undergraduate psychology students who registered for an optional participant pool signed up to participate in the study for extra course credit. Upon arriving at the lab participants read and signed a consent form and then completed a survey which was decoupled from the consent form and course credit information. Only the measures analyzed for this study are described. Scale properties are reported in Table 1.

#### 2.1.2. Materials

Lay's General Procrastination scale (GPS; Lay, 1986) is a widely used and well-validated 20-item scale that assesses global

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/890361>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/890361>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)