



Justifiable justifications in sequential indulgent choice situations: A framework for future research based on perceived exceptionality

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ABSTRACT

Much can be learned from studying the effectiveness of consumers' justifications for their behavior across multiple sequential choice occasions, but research on this topic is scarce. In response, the present research puts forth a conceptual framework for addressing vice-virtue dilemmas through the lens of repeated justifications for indulgent choice based on the notion of perceived exceptionality over time and the salient prior decisions that help to determine this exceptionality. The authors discuss their framework for a broader understanding of indulgent choice and decision-making patterns, as well as possible process mechanisms and specific avenues for future research.

1. Introduction

Imagine that Brian is halfway through a two-month long diet to get ready for his summer vacation. So far, he has resisted all the guilty pleasures such as candy and junk food. This is when Brian enters a coffee shop and sees that his favorite ice cream sundae is offered on a special 50% discount, an offer he has never seen. After a short deliberation, Brian can't resist the exceptionality of the deal and buys the ice cream sundae. It is apparent that the special discount provides an opportunity for value-minded consumers like Brian to justify indulgence. In fact, prior research highlights the tensions that arise between various marketing tactics in association with indulgent products and food decision making (Haws & Winterich, 2013; Kivetz & Zheng, 2017; Mishra & Mishra, 2011) suggesting the importance of understanding the more general dynamics between these marketing levers and goal-related behavior.

Now consider that Brian's story does not stop after this first sundae. Suppose that Brian visits the same coffee shop again three days later and finds the same special deal still being offered. What is his likely reaction, given that he is still on a diet which he recently deviated from on the same treat in the same shop? How effective will the same justification (i. e., a special discount) be in Brian's mind if it is used repeatedly under what could now be perceived as less exceptional circumstances? Will Brian perceive that same justification as too weak now and seek a different type of justification, say, a reward for an important project he

successfully completed today at work? And if so, at what point will the 50% discount have regained its effectiveness as a justification, and would a different type of justification regain its effectiveness sooner or later? More generally, what are the precise factors and limits to understanding the effectiveness of the use of certain types of justifications for indulging over time?

Prior research is surprisingly sparse on this issue, although many researchers have called for or begun to study choices over time (Dholakia et al., 2005; Novemsky & Dhar, 2005; Zemack-Rugar et al., 2012). Herein, we present a conceptual framework addressing these questions. We base our framework on the notion of perceived exceptionality of choice occasions (Rishika et al., 2021; Sussman et al., 2015; Sussman & Alter, 2012). We define an exceptional choice occasion as one that is perceived as uncommon or infrequent, and going beyond the realm of everyday life, whereas an ordinary choice occasion is one that is perceived as common, frequent, and within the realm of everyday life (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014). In contrast to the insightful examinations of the isolated choice situations most characteristic of self-control research, our research focuses on how consumers might use justifications for indulgence in separate choice situations over time. Such patterns of behavior are important given that in many domains, a single failure to resist temptation comes at near-zero cost, with only repeated consumption having severe negative effects (the "epsilon-cost temptation"; Myrseth & Fishbach, 2009, p. 248).

Moving beyond an examination of single or dual choice situations is

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important because research adopting this narrow focus is unlikely to detect potentially complex dynamics that might occur between choice occasions over time. Importantly, this limitation might lead researchers to erroneous conclusions. For instance, a person choosing chocolate cake over fruit salad would lead researchers to the conclusion that this person has low or no self-control (a perspective that Vosgerau et al. [2020] suggest is often misguided). In reality, however, this person might be engaging in a strategic form of pleasure management (Hoch & Loewenstein, 1991; Rishika et al., 2021), allowing occasional indulgence while enacting healthy eating patterns overall. Novemsky and Dhar (2005) point out that “the mere fact that an outcome is embedded in a sequence might create a frame of reference that can influence subsequent preferences” (p. 396). Similarly, Myrseth and Fishbach (2009, p. 248) note that consumers will not even identify a form of conflict in one isolated situation; only “if the temptation is perceived in relation to multiple future action opportunities, then the individual may identify self-control conflict”. As such, examining multiple sequential choice occasions explicitly is paramount for a better understanding of consumers’ indulgent choices.

Despite the importance of studying patterns of indulgence over longer periods of time, little research adopts this approach (Rishika et al., 2021). Most literature examining indulgent behavior utilizes randomized experiments, making the study of multiple sequential choices difficult to carry out, particularly beyond two choices within a short duration of time. Researchers might also rely on self-reported consumption patterns over longer time periods, for example, by asking participants about their healthy eating patterns or by using dietary recall methods (e.g., Delaney & Lades, 2017; Haws et al., 2017), but these methods have their own set of limitations. Ideally, researchers might analyze longitudinal choice data (or even better, consumption data) on an individual level, but of course, this data is difficult to obtain. While we acknowledge these difficulties, overcoming them provides opportunities for important contributions to the field through the opportunity to understand patterns of behavior over time (Chintagunta & Labroo, 2020; Goukens & Klesse, 2022; Rishika et al., 2021). Accordingly, the framework presented in this article suggests interesting research questions that researchers might address through incorporating a more generalized across-decision context approach to understanding choice patterns. Importantly, this framework is not focused on long-term outcomes per se but on how potential dynamics unfold over time, for example, with one choice affecting a second choice, affecting a third choice, and so on.

By drawing on the concept of perceived exceptionality, our framework departs from extant research suggesting other mechanisms by which one choice might affect a subsequent one (e.g., regulatory resources, Vohs & Heatherton, 2000). As we will discuss, we believe that consumer perceptions of exceptionality are key for understanding the effectiveness of justifications used in subsequent situations. Based on our discussion, we propose a wear-out effect of justification effectiveness over time along with factors that will likely bolster or impair this effect.

As we present our framework, we focus the scope of our discussion to few sequential but separated indulgent consumption situations. However, our framework is intended to expand to other categories of justifications, to n consumption situations, and to consumer responses following restraint. We also note that the consumers’ identification of a self-control conflict remains crucial for our discussion. Thus, if consumers repeat a specific behavior to the extent that they contract a habit or routine (Khare & Inman, 2006), we would not expect our framework to apply.

2. Literature review

2.1. Justifying indulgent behavior in self-control dilemmas

Consumers typically have multiple goals driving their choices, and these goals may be in conflict (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Goldsmith et al.,

2019; Hoch & Loewenstein, 1991). Specifically, in what is often referred to as a self-control dilemma or a vice-virtue tradeoff (Liu et al., 2015; Rishika et al., 2021), consumers may find themselves in a situation in which a specific choice would accomplish a lower-order goal such as indulgence but at the same time compromise a higher-order goal such as health (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Labroo & Pocheptsova, 2017; Myrseth et al., 2009). When faced with such conflicts, consumer preferences are often time inconsistent, and more immediate indulgence goals override long-term health goals (Delaney & Lades, 2017; Hoch & Loewenstein, 1991; O’Donoghue & Rabin, 2000). The choice of an indulgent (or hedonic, vice, want, etc.) product over a healthier (or utilitarian, virtue, should, etc.) product thus typically induces feelings of conflict, guilt or anticipated regret, raising the need for justification (Kivetz & Simonson, 2002b, 2002a; Vosgerau et al., 2020). If the decision context allows consumers to justify the consumption, indulgent products are more likely to be consumed (Okada, 2005), a mechanism also termed licensing or self-licensing (deWitt Huberts et al., 2012, 2014b; Hui et al., 2009; Khan & Dhar, 2006; May & Irmak, 2014).

Notably, justifications are not merely impulsive breakdowns of the self-control system (which is also a vastly researched phenomenon). Rather, justifications are the deliberate and strategic employment of reasons why indulgence is acceptable on a given occasion (deWitt Huberts et al., 2014a, 2014b; Rishika et al., 2021; Shafir et al., 1993).

Various types of justifications can ease the guilt associated with the choice of indulgences, and many relate to our notion of perceived exceptionality. For example, unexpected “windfall gains” (e.g., winning the lottery) are typically categorized in separate mental accounts and thus considered as “play money” that is more readily spent on hedonic options (Arkes et al., 1994; Thaler, 1985). In a similar vein, being able to redeem frequency reward points alters consumer buying decisions towards more indulgence (Rishika et al., 2021; Smith & Sparks, 2009), especially when the perceived effort induced by the rewards program requirements is high (Kivetz & Simonson, 2002a). Whereas such windfall gains may occur only on occasion, other financial incentives occur frequently, and yet, we argue, they still serve as justifications for indulgence. For example, consumers justify the purchase of larger sizes of indulgent products when a price-quantity discount in the form of non-linear pricing (e.g., one scoop of ice cream for US\$3, two for US\$5) encourages doing so (Haws & Winterich, 2013). Price discounts also serve as a reasonable justification for increased purchase rates of indulgent products while bonus packs do not, because bonus packs imply even more indulgence which is more difficult to justify than a simple price discount (Kivetz & Zheng, 2017; Mishra & Mishra, 2011). Similarly, Khan and Dhar (2010) show that the purchase of a cross-category bundle is more likely when the discount is framed as savings on the relatively hedonic component rather than as savings on the utilitarian component or on the total bundle. Underlying most of these types of marketplace deals is a perception of the scarcity of the opportunity, that is, it will only be available for a short period of time (Lynn, 1991). For example, a “Today Only!” message introducing the 50% discount would enhance the perceived exceptionality of the discount for Brian, at least the first time he encounters it.

While many of the justifications discussed up to this point are directly provided by marketers, another important source justification is based on social motivations. Socially-based justifications may involve consumers focusing on the social benefits of indulgent consumption, potentially driven by a need for group membership or sense of community (Alba & Williams, 2013). Indeed, most hedonic stimuli such as indulgent foods are enjoyed in the presence of others, and thus social influence on hedonic experiences (Raghunathan & Corfman, 2006) and on food choice (Cruwys et al., 2015; Herman, 2015; Liu et al., 2020; McFerran et al., 2010) is strong. Specifically, prior research indicates increased affiliation or other relationship benefits associated with splurges (Dzhogleva & Lamberton, 2014; Lowe & Haws, 2014). For instance, in some shared self-control situations, consumers strengthen their social relationships through “partnering in crime” and committing

a joint self-control failure (Lowe & Haws, 2014, p. 489), suggesting that Brian may well justify a second ice cream purchase in pursuit of strengthening a social bond. Even a simple “everyone is doing it” rationale for consuming an indulgence provides justification for violating one’s more prudent goals (Herman et al., 2003). In short, justifying indulgence on the basis of some socially relevant motive seems to be fairly common, as social circumstances tend to readily lend an extraordinary or rare dimension to a choice situation (May & Irmak, 2018; Sussman & Alter, 2012).

Certainly, marketplace induced financial incentives and social motivations are not the only justifications to which the consumer wishing to indulge may turn, but these can provide powerful rationales for indulgent behavior. Importantly, a myriad of alternative types of justifications for indulgence exists, and consumers are adept at finding different justifications to alleviate the guilt associated with indulgent choices (e.g., Cheema & Soman, 2006). Some justifications may render the entire occasion as exceptional (e.g., winning the lottery, meeting a long-lost friend in a bar), others are relatively common (e.g., discounts) but evaluated as exceptional in particular instances. The question we ask in our research is, then, whether the decision context still allows consumers to justify indulgence if the repeated use of justifications undermines the perceived exceptionality of the choice occasion. For us to expect such effects, it is crucial that a single decision to indulge has an effect that carries over to one or more subsequent choice occasions. In what follows, we present findings from prior literature suggesting such carry-over effects.

2.2. Evidence for carry-over effects from one choice situation to subsequent ones

Although no prior research to our knowledge has directly addressed the issue of the repeated use of justifications from one choice to the next, there is some research about how past behaviors and/or the recall of past behaviors impact current behavior, suggesting that dynamics among similar and dissimilar justifications might make consumers perceive them as more or less exceptional (see Table 1).

Prior studies in the domain of hedonic consumption have examined sequential choice more generally. For example, the licensing literature indicates that a prior virtuous act (e.g., eating a salad for lunch) serves as a license that is used to justify less virtuous subsequent behavior (e.g., “I can now afford to eat pizza for dinner,” Prinsen, Evers, & de Ridder 2016). Similarly, Mukhopadhyay and Johar (2009) demonstrate that consumers use prior impulse buying restraint for justifying subsequent indulgence. Recently, Rishika, Feurer and Haws (2021) propose forms of strategic licensing that extend the time frame of such justifications, meaning that some consumers strategically plan to indulge in relatively exceptional yet predictable occasions but not in others. Other findings suggest that the decision in an initial choice situation impacts a subsequent choice decision, albeit sometimes in opposite directions. For instance, Soman and Cheema (2004) demonstrate that an initial violation of a health goal may be demotivating for continuing efforts to pursue that health goal in subsequent decisions. In contrast, the “sequential mitigation effect” suggests that prior impulsive behavior may decrease one’s subsequent desire for indulgence (Dholakia et al., 2005). Regulatory resource accounts focus on self-control subsequent to restraint and reveal that the diminishing of such resources leads to decreased self-control (Baumeister, 2002; Vohs & Heatherton, 2000). In contrast, when two consecutive decisions require similar self-control processes (including resisting indulgent foods), resisting temptation becomes easier on the second decision following prior restraint (Dewitte et al., 2009). Other research suggests that when competing goals exist, such as indulgence and good health, consumers might balance indulgent and healthy choices over time (Dhar & Simonson, 1999). Given these various findings from prior research, there is clearly a connection between various consumption episodes that likely extends over longer periods of time. Thus, examining the role that justifications for

Table 1
Selected literature linking indulgent behavior between choice occasions.

Author(s) (Year)	Focus	Key Finding
Cascio & Plant, 2015	Anticipated future virtuous act	Anticipating a future moral act licenses people to behave immorally now.
Cochran & Tesser, 1996	Prior indulgence	Once one’s goals are violated, subsequent behavior is sent on a downward spiral.
de Witt Huberts et al., 2012	Prior virtuous act	Having a licensing cue (perceiving oneself as having invested greater effort) leads to increased snack intake while controlling for impulsive factors.
Dhar & Simonson, 1999	Balancing different goals	If each choice in subsequent consumption episodes involves a tradeoff between pleasure and good health, consumers tend to balance attribute levels (e.g., in each episode have one tasty item and one healthy item).
Dholakia, Gopinath, & Bagozzi, 2005	Prior indulgence	Participation in a prior impulsive choice task (and having experienced desire) significantly reduces the decision maker’s likelihood of choosing impulsively in a subsequent task.
Fishbach & Dhar, 2005	Prior restraint	Dieters’ perceptions of goal progress facilitate the choice of incongruent (indulgent) food.
Flores et al., 2019	Prior presentation of unhealthy/healthy option	When an indulgent (healthy) dish is the first item, lower-calorie (higher-calorie) dishes are subsequently chosen, and overall caloric consumption is lower (higher).
Kahan, Polivy & Herman, 2003	Prior restraint	Restrained eaters depleted their reserves of ego strength in an Asch-type conformity task, leading to an increase in indulgence.
Khan & Dhar, 2006	Prior virtuous act	Licensing can operate by committing to a virtuous act in a preceding choice, which reduces negative self-attributions associated with the purchase of relative luxuries.
May & Irmak, 2014	Prior goal progress	Impulsive individuals who possess a regulatory goal are likely to distort memories of past behavior, manufacturing goal progress to license indulgence in the present.
Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2009	Prior restraint	The salience of restraint at a prior impulse buying opportunity causes consumers to reward themselves subsequently by choosing indulgence over non-indulgence. Prior indulgence can have the same effect as prior restraint if the prior indulgence is justifiable.
Mukhopadhyay, Sengupta & Ramanathan, 2008	Recall of past behavior	Chronically non-impulsive individuals display behavioral consistency over time in that they are resisting (succumbing) when they recall having resisted (succumbed) earlier. In contrast, impulsive individuals show a switching pattern, resisting current temptations if they recall having succumbed, and vice versa.

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Table 1 (continued)

Author(s) (Year)	Focus	Key Finding
Nikolova, Lambertson, & Haws, 2016	Recall of past behavior	Easy recall of past success of self-control lead to increased self-control. Difficult recall of past success or any recall of past failures lead to decreased self-control.
Prinsen et al., 2016	Prior indulgence	People are more likely to indulge again after an initial indulgent choice with a license. Self-licensing negatively affects goal re-engagement in the same situation, but not in a new situation.
Ramanathan & Williams, 2007	Prior indulgence	Consumers feel simultaneous mixtures of positive and negative emotions in response to indulgences, depending on differences in individual impulsivity. These mixtures are resolved differently over time, leading to differences in subsequent choices.
Rishika, Feurer, & Haws, 2021	Balancing different goals	Some consumers (i.e., those that generally eat healthy diets) use the context of a reward program to construct a vice-virtue balancing strategy that involves indulgence in reward-redemption situations but not in other situations.
Zemack-Rugar, Corus & Brinberg, 2012	Prior indulgence	Key cognitive and emotional responses to initial self-control failure jointly underlie post-failure behavior.

indulgence play over time is essential to better understand patterns of behavior.

Several additional factors have been examined in pursuit of understanding how various characteristics of the person or situation affect choice and responses to indulgent or prudent behavior. For example, recalling acts of self-control success or failure differentially impacts chronically impulsive and less impulsive consumers with the former exhibiting switching behavior (indulging after recalling restraint and restraining after recalling indulgence) and the latter, less impulsive consumers, showing behavioral consistency (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2008). Other research examines the unique cognitive and emotional responses following self-control failure that may lead to additional failure or reform (Ramanathan & Williams, 2007; Zemack-Rugar et al., 2012). Notably, Ramanathan and Williams (2007) study complex positive and negative emotional responses following indulgence and how they lead to differences in subsequent choices. They find that, after indulging, impulsive people tend to continue to pursue hedonic choices in a subsequent self-control dilemma whereas prudent consumers reduce negative emotion through the choice of a utilitarian option.

Last, we find evidence for interesting dynamics over time not only in the literature on self-control regarding decision making about food, but also in the more specialized literature, for instance, on price promotion (being a financial justification). For instance, research addressing discount frequency effects (Alba et al., 1999; Lalwani & Monroe, 2005) suggests that the extent to which a brand is discounted frequently, but at shallow levels (versus infrequently, but with greater magnitude) has long-term effects in that it affects consumers' perceptions of average price level. This effect on perceived price level might suggest a change in effectiveness in terms of a future price promotion serving as a justification for buying a vice product. Moreover, Raghuram and Corfman (1999) show that past promotional behavior affects subsequent consumer evaluations. As such, price promotions likely have effects above and beyond a single choice situation. Interestingly, there is a debate in

the literature as to whether price promotions increase long-term behavior such as customer loyalty (DelVecchio et al., 2006; Gedenk & Neslin, 1999). Alterations in the appropriateness of using price promotions as a justification might also explain long-term effects.

Collectively, prior research indicates that the effectiveness of a justification in a subsequent situation is influenced by whether justifications were used (or not used) previously. But again, these connections have mostly been studied in fairly narrow temporal contexts. However, we suggest that salient prior self-control dilemmas may be used to evaluate a current consumption opportunity. In the following section, we introduce the concept of perceived exceptionality and offer propositions addressing the dynamic nature of the use of justifications for indulgent behavior over time.

3. Perceived exceptionality of justifications in sequential choice situations: A conceptual framework for future research

Combining the notion of consumers' need to justify indulgent choices and the sequential nature of consumer decision making, we now propose how the use of certain types of justifications may impact subsequent decision making and the further use of justifications.

As we have noted before, we propose that the concept of perceived exceptionality is essential in understanding consumer reactions to justifications in sequential choice situations. Extant research suggests that two key qualities are inherent to occasions that are perceived as exceptional. The first one is rarity (May & Irmak, 2018), which is essentially defined as "something that happens with low frequency" (p. 383). Secondly, the notion of perceived exceptionality also typically carries a subjective meaning of *specialness* (Zauberman, Ratner, et al., 2009), meaning that something is "distinguished by some unusual quality; especially being in some way superior" (p. 715, citing the Merriam-Webster dictionary). Both qualities of perceived exceptional occasions seem to relate strongly to justifying indulgent choice, as prior licensing literature suggests that infrequent and special events such as birthdays, holidays, and successfully completing a project may serve as strong licenses to indulge (deWitt Huberts et al., 2014a, 2014b; Prinsen et al., 2016; Rishika et al., 2021). Thus, our key contention is that factors impairing the long-term perception of exceptionality (i.e., rarity, specialness) of a specific choice occasion will be less likely to serve as a license to indulge in the context of subsequent choices, whereas factors promoting the perception of exceptionality will bolster this likelihood. "Long-term perception" of exceptionality implies that consumers will dynamically update their perception of exceptionality at each choice occasion and form a decision to indulge or restrain anew based upon that updated perception at each point in time. Notably, interactions between rarity and specialness are likely such that a justification that happens more often also loses its sense of specialness to some extent, again impeding perceived exceptionality.

We capture these potential dynamics in our conceptual framework (Fig. 1), which can accommodate a longer series of decisions (so long as the consumer has awareness that the contexts are related). Our framework proposes that, in a vice-virtue dilemma, consumers will assess the exceptionality of the occasion, and if it is perceived to be exceptional to a high degree, this will serve as an effective license to indulge. A key driver of perceived exceptionality is the retrieval of a prior justification from a relevant previous consumption context, underscoring the importance of understanding what factors of a current situation make specific past situations more salient as a basis of comparison. Importantly, the resulting consumption episode (including the decision to indulge or restrain along with salient characteristics of the vice-virtue dilemma) will be stored in consumers' long-term memory, and potentially be retrieved in the assessment of the exceptionality of a subsequent vice-virtue dilemma.

In the following sections, we first consider the perceived exceptionality of a choice occasion serving as a license to indulge in one isolated self-control dilemma. Subsequently, we develop propositions

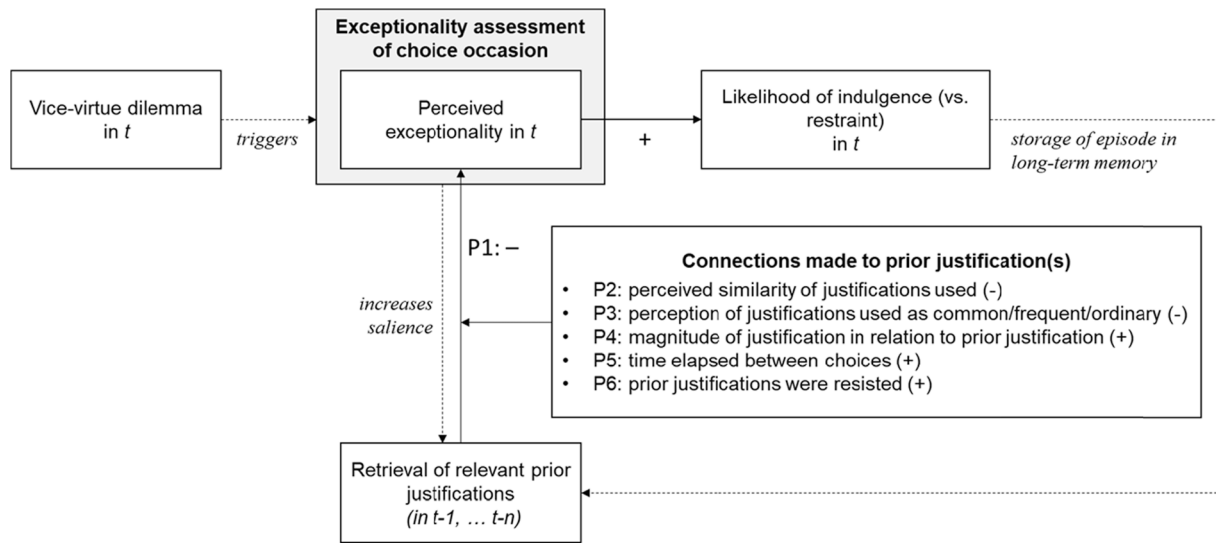


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework.

about how justifications used in prior vice-virtue dilemmas might undermine the perceived exceptionality in a subsequent choice occasion.

3.1. Perceived exceptionality as a license to indulge in an isolated self-control dilemma

Let us first consider an isolated self-control dilemma (in *t*) such that a consumer has the choice between a vice and a virtue option for which choosing a vice satisfies a short-term indulgence goal and choosing a virtue satisfies a long-term health goal. Prior literature would lead us to expect that this consumer is more likely to choose the vice option if the decision context provides the flexibility to justify its consumption (Okada, 2005). Specifically, we contend that the consumer will evaluate the exceptionality of the choice occasion, and an important driver of the exceptionality of the occasion will be the presence of a justification for an indulgent choice, say, a 50% special discount as in our opening scenario (Mishra & Mishra, 2011). The exceptionality of the occasion might be evaluated in terms of its ability to reduce guilt or anticipated regret and might include the justification itself as well as the context in which it is presented (Okada, 2005; Vosgerau et al., 2020). In general, the higher the perceived exceptionality of the occasion, the more likely it serves as a license to indulge in a first (“time 1”) choice occasion (Rishika et al., 2021; Sussman & Alter, 2012), making an indulgent choice more likely. How then might justifications drive perceived exceptionality and hence indulgent choice over time?

3.2. How perceived exceptionality licenses indulgence in a subsequent self-control dilemma: Proposition of a “wear-out” effect of justifiability

We propose that when a subsequent purchase occasion provides the opportunity to justify indulgent behavior, consumers will again assess the exceptionality of the choice occasion (*t*), but this time considering previously used justifications (in *t-1*, ... *t-n*) as illustrated in Fig. 1 and discussed below. In this assessment, consumers now consider relevant prior situations and the justifications that may have been present and/or used in those. At the same time, specific characteristics of the current occasion, such as the presence of a specific justification and the context in which it is provided, will increase the salience and thus recollection of prior justifications. Consumers will likely use motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) to guide this retrieval process toward prior decisions that might support indulgence in the current one.

We then suggest that the perceived exceptionality of a choice occasion which is determined by a specific justification provided under

specific circumstances further depends on how exactly one or more preceding indulgence decisions were justified. Specifically, our key proposition is that justifications for indulging may “wear out” over time because the recollection of prior justifications curbs the extent to which a current occasion is perceived as exceptional. As such, if specific external triggers for indulgent consumption repeat (such as a 50% discount that is offered frequently; Alba et al., 1999), and provided that the respective prior consumption episodes are retrieved from memory, the perceived exceptionality of the situation may be threatened by definition of reduced rarity and specialness (e.g., department stores renowned for their “Sale of the Year” nearly every weekend). As a result, perceived exceptionality of the occasion is reduced, and indulgence less likely. In other words, the effectiveness of a justification to drive indulgent choice is reduced if consumers recall having used a justification before, as would be the case when Brian returns a few days later and finds the same discount still available.

Proposition 1. *If consumers recall having used a justification before, the perceived exceptionality of the choice occasion is reduced, which leads to a lower likelihood to indulge (wear-out effect of justifiability).*

3.3. Potential moderators for the proposed wear-out effect

Based on the notion of perceived exceptionality, we now propose a set of moderators that might influence the strength of the proposed wear-out effect by increasing the salience of prior justifications and by increasing the extent with which retrieval undermines perceived exceptionality of the current occasion. Prior research acknowledging dynamic aspects of consumption suggests that these dynamics hinge on a sequence of choice situations being perceived by consumers as connected, especially if consumers are pursuing long-term goals (Myrseth & Fishbach, 2009; Novemsky & Dhar, 2005). By perceived connectedness, we mean two or more choice situations that consumers logically link together or categorize in the same manner based on their defining elements or characteristics (Tu & Soman, 2014). Thus, if logical connections are made to prior justifications, perceived exceptionality is likely to be affected.

The moderators discussed in the next sections facilitate making such connections in several ways. Conversely, if no connection is made between two purchases, it is unlikely for a choice in a prior situation to serve as a reference for a subsequent one (Novemsky & Dhar, 2005), and in fact such past occasions would be less likely to become salient in the first place during the current vice-virtue dilemma. As such, perceived connectedness between two otherwise similar choice situations in which

justifications are used should negatively affect perceived exceptionality by rendering the justifications less rare and less special, which ultimately bolsters the wear-out effect we propose.

3.3.1. Type of justifications used

Based on the notion of perceived exceptionality (Sussman & Alter, 2012), we generally propose that the wear-out effect over time is conditional on the perceived similarity compared to the justification previously used (the higher the similarity, the stronger the wear-out effect). If the result of a comparison of one present type of justification with a prior type of justification is that the two types are similar, this should naturally undermine the perceived specialness of the focal one, mitigating the exceptionality of the choice occasion. One form of (dis)similarity is *within* justification category (e.g., financial justifications) where similarity is highest if two identical justifications are used repeatedly. Thus, after just indulged based on a 50% discount, Brian in our opening vignette might perceive the exceptionality of the choice occasion to be higher in time 2 if the justification is now, instead, an unexpected bonus from his employer (Arkes et al., 1994) rather than the same discount again.

Another way of thinking about (dis)similarity is *across* justification categories (e.g., financial vs. social justification). For instance, Brian might find it more appropriate to use a different justification category such as a social justification (that is by nature relatively dissimilar to a financial justification) given that he has just indulged using a financial justification in time 1.

In fact, we propose that the concept of similarity extends to the entire shopping (or consumption) situation in which the justifications are used. This understanding of similarity is akin to the concept of transaction similarity in price judgments (Haws & Bearden, 2006; Kuester et al., 2015; Xia et al., 2004) and may encompass an abundance of contextual factors (e.g., timing, store location, and brand names) over and above the type of justification itself. Differences in all such characteristics across subsequent choice situations are expected to decrease similarity, and thus ultimately bolster perceived exceptionality. For example, repeatedly using the same 50% discount as justification in the same coffee shop might render a choice occasion less exceptional for Brian than if the location or other aspects of the purchase environment were different (e.g., a 50% discount in a coffee shop followed by a 50% discount at clothing retailer).

Brian is also more likely to make connections based on his categorization of time events. Tu and Soman (2014) provide a great example to illustrate such a categorization process. If Brian was a marketing professor teaching only on Mondays, then for him all Mondays would be similar and very different from the rest of the week. Thus, Brian would likely connect two vice-virtue tradeoff situations on two consecutive Mondays after his lecture more readily than two vice-virtue tradeoff situations on a Monday and the following Thursday.

Taken together, using a dissimilar justification should lead to a higher perceived exceptionality of the choice occasion and higher indulgence. Thus:

Proposition 2. *The negative effect that recalling a prior justification has on the perceived exceptionality of the choice occasion and ultimately on indulgence is stronger (weaker) if the justifications used are perceived as similar (dissimilar).*

3.3.2. Inherent exceptionality of justifications used

Next, we highlight that not all justifications are equally compelling, and we expect that certain justifications may be generally more or less likely to be construed as inherently exceptional. For example, based on Brian's experiences in the marketplace, he might view a "happy hour special" as common, but the 50% discount on ice cream as less common.

Further, some social justifications (Brian's birthday or his closest friend's birthday, weddings, etc.) also occur relatively infrequently and may be less likely to reduce perceived exceptionality than would

financial justifications such as price discounts or birthdays among a wider set of friends, families and acquaintances. Relatedly, opportunities specifically labeled as "scarce", "rare" or "limited" in nature are often used to justify indulgence (Sevilla & Redden, 2014). Our perceived exceptionality account also implies that the proposed wear-out effect becomes stronger with more repetitions of the same justification, (e.g., higher discount frequency; Alba et al. 1999) because as rarity is reduced, and similarity becomes more salient, perceptions of specialness diminish (as would certainly happen if after several visits to the coffee shop, Brian keeps seeing the 50% off ice cream offer). Future research could identify how quickly different repeated justifications reach a point at which they are no longer deemed sufficient.

Proposition 3. *The negative effect that recalling a prior justification has on the perceived exceptionality of the choice occasion and ultimately on indulgence is stronger (weaker) if the justifications used are inherently perceived as common, frequent, and ordinary (uncommon, infrequent, special).*

3.3.3. Justification magnitude

The notion of (dis)similarity extends also to the impact of the magnitude of one specific justification used multiple times. For example, a second exposure to a 50% discount should be less compelling for Brian than the first exposure, whereas a smaller discount, say 30%, would be even less justifiable. Of course, seeing these two different discounts occur in the opposite order would likely increase the propensity to indulge in time 2. Similarly, in the category of social justifications, the birthday of a close friend is likely more compelling than of a more distant acquaintance. As such, the magnitude of the prior justification serves as a salient reference against which the subsequent justification is evaluated (Monroe, 1973; Novemsky & Dhar, 2005). If the magnitude of the discount had instead increased, then this would likely lead it to be more compelling, thereby increasing repeated indulgence. What the specific thresholds are that would increase the specialness and therefore acceptability of a justification could be examined in future research.

Proposition 4. *The negative effect that recalling a prior justification has on the perceived exceptionality of the choice occasion and ultimately on indulgences is weaker (stronger) if the present justification is higher (lower) in magnitude relative to the prior one.*

3.3.4. Elapsed time

Of course, the issue of time is key in sequential choice, and consumer perception of time (how quickly it is perceived to pass, etc.) is a highly complex and subjective matter that is prone to biases and inaccuracies (Loewenstein & Thaler, 1989; Malkoc & Zauberman, 2018; Zauberman, Kim, et al., 2009). Further, time perception also depends on many individual and contextual factors such as culture (Graham, 1981). In general, the less time that has elapsed between a decision to indulge based on a particular justification and a consumer encountering a similar vice-virtue scenario again, the more likely that wear-out effects will prevail (as when Brian seems the same discount a few days later). However, another interesting issue to consider is elapsed time since the last choice occasion in which consumers actually chose to indulge rather than restrain (e.g., time 1: 50% discount + choice to indulge; time 2: 50% discount + choice to restrain; time 3: 50% discount +?). As we have seen, prior restraint can serve as a license for indulgence in a subsequent choice situation (Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2009), but what if that prior restraint is itself preceded by an indulgent choice in which the justification was similar to the one now at hand? Following our prior arguments, in such a time 3 situation, *not* having used the justification in time 2 might decrease connections being made to the time 1 indulgent choice. However, if the choice in time 2 to restrain was made *because* of the decision in time 1 to indulge (e.g., Dholakia et al., 2005), it is also possible that recalling restraint in time 2 might also make indulgence in time 1 more salient, thereby increasing the connections perceived between time 3 and time 1. Finally, a time 2 situation in which the prior

justification (e.g., the 50% off offer Brian succumbed to) is no longer present may extend the perceived time since indulging in time 1 and therefore increased the likelihood that the 50% discount will again be perceived as more exceptional when it reappears in time 3.

Future research might also consider other aspects of the time elapsed between decisions as forms of connectedness, such as perceived temporal distance (Eyal et al., 2008), the extent to which consumers recall deal frequency (Krishna et al., 1991), the blurring of distinct lines between the past, the present, and the future (Mogilner, Hershfield, & Aaker, 2018), consumption rate (Siddiqui et al., 2017), accounting periods (Soster et al., 2010), and explore across- versus within-consumption episode situations (Dhar & Simonson, 1999). More generally, understanding the thresholds of time for which certain past scenarios are perceived as relevant to the current decision would further enhance understanding of behavioral patterns over time.

Proposition 5. *The negative effect that recalling a prior justification has on the perceived exceptionality of the choice occasion and ultimately on indulgences is weaker (stronger) as more (less) time elapses between occasions.*

3.3.5. Prior restraint

So far, we have primarily focused on the case that an individual uses a justification to indulge, which then impacts the subsequent use of a justification via the wear-out effect that we have proposed. However, consumers may also recall resisting a specific justification, for example, Brian initially passes up on the 50% off offer. In general, prior research has demonstrated that showing restraint can lead one to feel more licensed to indulge subsequently (Khan & Dhar, 2006), with the salience of this prior restraint playing a significant role in the present situation (Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2009). In contrast to these insights, other research indicates that recalling a self-control success increases the likelihood of a subsequent self-control success (Nikolova et al., 2016). The reason underlying these seemingly conflicting results is likely the underlying mechanism: Brian might be in a situation in which he just cannot muster the self-control to resist a temptation, but he might also not be willing to muster the self-control to resist a temptation (Prinsen et al., 2019). To illustrate this point, Rishika, Feurer and Haws' (2021) research suggests forms of strategic licensing such that consumers with overall lower-calorie consumption patterns might follow a long-term plan that involves strategic indulgence in situations that are considered exceptional in part due to prior restraint to the point that they now anticipate that they will regret *not* indulging. Thus, Brian would conclude that it is quite beneficial to indulge on this exceptional situation in which a justification is externally provided.

Taken together, if we assume a multi-choice context and perceived exceptionality as underlying process, we propose that recalling having restrained previously despite the presence of a justification will weaken the proposed wear-out or might even contribute to the perceived exceptionality of the purchase occasion, likely based upon other key factors we have discussed including connectedness, magnitude of justification, and elapsed time.

Proposition 6. *The negative effect that recalling a prior justification has on the perceived exceptionality of the choice occasion and ultimately on indulgences is weaker (stronger) if the justification present previously was resisted (used).*

3.3.6. Additional considerations

Although the list of additional considerations affecting patterns of vice-virtue decision-making patterns over time is long, we mention three last issues as particularly noteworthy.

First, prior research suggests that connectedness may come in different forms, such as connections seen between an entrée and a dessert (Dhar & Simonson, 1999). Marketplace actions can further make connections between choices salient, as would be the case for Brian participating in reward programs which are precisely designed such that consumers see themselves approaching a redemption situation with

each purchase, thereby establishing a connection (Kivetz et al., 2006; Rishika et al., 2021). More generally, understanding when current self-control decisions are viewed as part of a sequence of similar decisions or not would shed light on consumption behaviors over time.

Second, factors that are proposed to lead to a wear-out effect might also interact with one another. For example, Brian may perceive a self-control dilemma occurring at a dinner party with friends as unrelated to a preceding self-control dilemma at work even though both events occur on the same day. On the other hand, Brian may perceive two consecutive dinner parties with the same friends as related despite a longer elapsed time period between the two events. Again, justifications such as price promotions from the same restaurant at different points in time (again, consider the coffee shop scenario) are likely to be categorized as more related than the same level of discount at two different restaurants (if, on the next occasion, the consumer instead encountered a half-price appetizer promotion at a fast casual restaurant around the corner). It is also possible that some forms of justification may actually prevent the consumer from acknowledging their prior indulgence as a failure, for example, the re-categorization of an expense (Loureiro & Haws, 2015; Soman & Cheema, 2004). As such, any connection to a subsequent situation would be effectively severed, and therefore no inputs from prior self-control dilemmas are considered.

Third, additional variables likely interact with the proposed relationships, such as consumer traits (e.g., sale proneness, health commitment, eating habits, price consciousness, impulsiveness, self-control) or the salience and level of connections seen between choices. Incorporating these variables therefore acknowledges that “not all dieters are the same” (Xie et al., 2021, p. 143). Notably, recent research indicates that some consumers allow themselves to indulge strategically in certain situations but not in others (Prinsen et al., 2019; Rishika et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2021). As such, future research should consider these variables as potential boundary conditions for both the need for a justification for indulgent consumption in the first place as well as the likelihood for a wear-out effect to occur.

4. General discussion

4.1. Summary and implications

In the present research, we shine a spotlight specifically on contexts in which consumers are making decisions related to indulgent options, and how they might use justifications for more indulgent consumption versus less hedonic options or refraining entirely. Although prior research clearly suggests that justifications are more important for hedonic purchases, what is lacking in the current literature is a profound understanding of the interplay of justifications across multiple occasions involving goal-relevant behaviors. To date, research typically explores single-choice or, at best, dual-choice situations. Closing this gap in the literature likely improves our understanding of consumers' indulgent behavior.

To accomplish this, and to inspire future research, the present research puts forward a framework of indulgent choice based on the perceived exceptionality of choice occasions conditional on the retrieval of prior justifications. In this context, managers provide, and consumers use, justifications for indulgent behavior (Haws & Winterich, 2013; Kivetz & Zheng, 2017; Mishra & Mishra, 2011; Okada, 2005). As consumers are trading off short-term indulgence goals and long-term health goals in each choice occasion (Hoch & Loewenstein, 1991) they likely incorporate prior justifications used (or resisted) in subsequent decisions. Prior justification-related food-decision making research to date does not sufficiently capture these interdependencies over time.

Our key proposition is that if a comparison between a present justification and prior justification highlights the similarity and connectedness of the occasions, perceived exceptionality of the present situation is reduced such that the likelihood of indulgence is decreased. We present several propositions relating to the specific factors that we

believe might bolster or curb this wear-out effect.

Notably, our framework allows for adaptation to different contexts and justifications, and even more sequential consumption situations, thereby contributing to other literature streams as well. For instance, the pricing literature might use our framework to examine long-term effects in consumer responses to price promotions.

Our framework also has important implications for managers and consumers. For instance, firms can optimize the way they provide consumers with justifications for indulgence through adjustments to personalized price promotions in e-commerce in terms of frequency, type, and magnitude that bolster the perceived exceptionality of the offer (Ansari et al., 2000; Häubl & Trifts, 2000). As a specific example, if a consumer previously purchased ice cream on a special discount, he or she may react more favorably to free item with purchase offer in a subsequent situation. Managers may also connect discounts to special occasions to increase the perceived exceptionality and avoid wear-out. Breyers' buy-one-get-one-free offer for ice cream delivery to celebrate "National Best Friends Day" (Tyko, 2018; Zane et al., 2021) serves as a good example. On the other hand, our research might also inform consumers to recognize such strategies and instead recognize offers as more ordinary and less exceptional to reduce indulgence.

Overall, we hope that the present research will lead to more research about justifications for indulgent consumption in sequential choice situations, in recognition that understanding how various justifications work at one point in time depends on how the same or other justifications have been used previously.

4.2. Guidance for testing our framework

We believe that there is significant potential to test various aspects of our framework empirically, using a variety of methods. To begin, understanding responses to justifications in a repeated consumption context, such as through explicit analysis of actual subsequent consumer choices on an individual level in a grocery store or restaurant environment could be very insightful. For example, if we have a history of Brian's purchase patterns, we can examine patterns of purchase based on the magnitude of price promotions and the type of food purchased. Further, the underlying processes and moderators might be fruitfully explored in controlled experimental studies. In addition to manipulating justifications and observing long-term outcomes in terms of food choice, we encourage researchers to adopt longitudinal designs (Chintagunta & Labroo, 2020; Goukens & Klesse, 2022) that include randomized treatments in consecutive choice occasions. Such longitudinal experimental set-ups would allow researchers to manipulate various levels and forms of connectedness across different occasions, ideally through using multiple lab sessions in which participants are confronted with decisions like those Brian was facing in our opening example. For instance, researchers could adopt an experimental design in which different types of justifications for indulgence (e.g., financial vs. social) are randomly presented over a series of decisions (e.g., the manipulation of the justification type in $t = 1$ followed by the manipulation of the justification type in $t = 2$ etc.). More complex longitudinal designs could also include the boundary conditions we have proposed, such as the manipulation of the time that has elapsed since $t = 1$ (e.g., additionally manipulating the timing of the second justification, such as $t = 2$ vs. $t = 3$). In so doing, the complex dynamics and carry-over effects we suggest can become apparent. We provide specific guidance related to the key factors of our framework next.

4.2.1. Manipulation of justifications

A very practical question for testing the propositions embedded in our framework is what type and magnitude of potential marketplace justifications should be used. Regarding price promotions, following Blattberg et al. (1995), starting with a 20% discount seems plausible. However, there is also research using manipulations of price promotions of lesser or greater magnitude (e.g., "special 50% off promotion", Kivetz

& Zheng, 2017). Also, discounts are likely to differ by industry and product category given differences in the usual timing, frequency, and magnitude of promotions. As such, it might be necessary to adjust manipulations based on these norms to ensure external validity. In terms of social justifications, researchers can be more creative as anything might provide a license from going out with friends to birthdays to gatherings at work to celebrate the success of a project recently completed. Pre-testing to establish various levels of social justification is necessary.

One challenge for researchers arises when incorporating different justifications or justification categories in their experiment. Here, the problem lies in crafting a manipulation that is different in nature, but equal otherwise, most importantly, in terms of perceived exceptionality and magnitude. For instance, does the justification of celebrating the success of a work project correspond to a 20%, 50% or 80% discount for the favorite ice cream? Specific pretests will be necessary to appropriately calibrate levels of justification for cross-category comparisons.

Researchers can then think about the occasion in which the justification occurs and vary the vignettes in terms of perceived exceptionality. For instance, in our opening scenario, we have framed the discount as a special one. Similarly, Prinsen et al. (2016) present a chocolate pie as "a special occasion and one-time opportunity", thereby providing a more powerful justification. Providing a 50% special discount as part of a grand opening of a new restaurant will, for example, further increase the perceived exceptionality of the situation.

4.2.2. Measurement issues

Our framework is based on the concept of licensing, that is, making excuses for indulgent behavior before actual enactment, such that the prospective indulgence is made acceptable for oneself (deWitt Huberts et al., 2014a). Hence, the framework assumes that consumers consciously and deliberately consider the appropriateness of indulging in a specific situation given the justification they encounter (rather than impulsive breakdowns of the self-control system). Lab experiments testing our propositions should account for this notion by including process variables such as guilt and regret while also including control conditions without these available justifications as a basis of comparison. While *anticipated* (rather than experienced) regret is a key indicator of a self-control dilemma (Vosgerau et al., 2020), it might well be *experienced* guilt or regret *following* indulgence that might play into consumers' assessment of appropriateness in a subsequent period. Lowe and Haws (2014) use a single item to measure guilt: "If you were to purchase the item in this situation, how guilty would you feel?" anchored by "not guilty at all" [1] and "very guilty" [7]. Vosgerau et al. (2020) use a single-item to measure anticipated regret, anchored (1) I don't think I would regret my choice at all, and (7) I think I will regret my choice. It is possible to adjust measures of guilt or regret such that they represent anticipated guilt or guilt experienced. Note that recent research suggests consumers indulging strategically might anticipate or experience negative affect for *not* indulging in a situation in which indulgences are part of a sustainable consumption pattern that is geared overall towards virtue rather than vice (Rishika et al., 2021).

Other affective (anticipated) reactions to indulgence are also conceivable, such as shame, and researchers might use a variety of such measures to capture different affective reactions.

For example, Prinsen et al. (2016) use single-item scales to assess guilt similar to Lowe and Haws (2014), but also regret ("How much do you regret your choice to buy the piece of chocolate pie?"), shame ("How ashamed do you feel about your choice to buy the piece of chocolate pie?"), and justifiability ("How justified do you find your choice to buy the piece of chocolate pie?").

As far as the dependent variable is concerned, a detailed overview of potential outcome measures (along with potential food stimuli) is provided by Haws et al. (2016). The classic "chocolate cake or fruit salad" paradigm that is characteristic for much self-control related research might not capture the full picture in single-choice examinations (Haws et al., 2016; Vosgerau et al., 2020) but it does still provide value.

However, examining multiple sequential choice occasions using this approach at least partly overcomes this limitation as more long-term patterns of consumptions can be observed.

4.3. Concluding remarks

In this paper, we call for researchers to examine the dynamics of choice and consumption over time. To motivate further research, we have put forth a framework and concrete propositions that we believe will provide interesting insights and contributions to the field. If scholars pursue these paths, a more nuanced and better understanding of consumers' consumption patterns is the likely outcome.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Sven Feurer: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Kelly L. Haws:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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