MIXED INDULGENCES: HOW PLEASURE AND SIN INTERACT IN PERCEPTIONS AND CHOICES OF MIXED INDULGENCES

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DESCRIPTIVE SUMMARY

Background

In my proposal for the Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship 2007, I introduced the concept of ‘mixed indulgences’. A mixed indulgence is a product or consumption experience that combines hedonic and utilitarian attributes in an inseparable bundle, typically for the purposes of satisfying hedonic or pleasure goals. Examples of such products might be heart-healthy chocolate cake or reduced-fat ice-cream. “Hedonic” refers to consumption that is traditionally viewed as affective, pleasurable consumption that fulfils goals of pleasure, “fun, fantasy and feelings” (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Hedonic consumption is often contrasted with utilitarian consumption that is more cognitive in nature and is motivated by functional needs (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000; O’Curry and Strahilevitz 2001).

Over the course of the last year, with funding from the fellowship, I conducted several studies to examine the hedonic/utilitarian space and implications for mixed indulgences. Three major findings emerged from these studies that will inform my research going forward.

First, the hedonic-utilitarian space was not a one-factor space or even two-factor space as conceptualized in the literature but a three-factor space. The utilitarian factor in my studies was consistent with previous studies in this domain. The hedonic construct, however, comprised two distinct factors that tapped into the good and bad sides of indulgence: a pleasure factor and a sin factor. Second, mixed indulgences occupied a distinct position on these three dimensions in that mixed indulgences were perceived to be significantly less sinful but not significantly less pleasurable than pure indulgences. Third, despite this perception (or perhaps because of it) mixed indulgences were less likely to be chosen relative to pure indulgences in a choice set.
Proposed Work for Fellowship 2008

I now propose to take my research on mixed indulgences further in two related directions to explain these findings. I would like to focus my study on factors that moderate representation and choice of mixed indulgences in general. In addition, I would like to understand changes along the three dimensions and implications for choice thereof for different kinds of mixed indulgences. In the next few paragraphs, I will briefly outline each research stream.

To study moderators of the representation of mixed indulgences, I draw on construal level theory that posits that the same object can be represented at two levels: an abstract level and a concrete level. Abstract (high-level) construal captures superordinate features of the product while concrete (low-level) construal captures subordinate features of the product (Fujita et al 2006). When high and low level construals are in conflict, such as in the case of sinful hedonic consumption (e.g. eating a chocolate cake) where the low level construal leads to pleasure but the high level construal of sin leads to negative emotions of guilt, the item will be chosen if the positive low-level construal is activated but rejected if the negative high-level construal is activated (Fujita et al 2006).

Given the three-dimensional space, I hypothesize that it is not just the conflicting pleasure and sin that are made salient by different construals but the way in which they interact that leads to positive or negative construals at abstract or concrete levels. Specifically, when the concrete construal is activated, sin adds to the overall hedonic utility of consuming the indulgence whereas when abstract construals are activated, perceptions of sin reduce overall hedonic utility of consuming the indulgence. Mixed indulgences, with their lack of sin are less likely to be chosen when concrete construals are activated (because of the lack of sin) and more likely to be chosen when abstract construals are activated (again because of the lack of sin).

In addition to situational factors, individual difference variables may also moderate the way in which pleasure and sin interact. One such individual difference moderator is differences in regulatory focus. Regulatory focus theory distinguishes between two end-states: (a) aspirations (promotion focus) and (b) responsibilities
(prevention focus). A promotion focus involves sensitivity to positive outcomes while a prevention focus involves sensitivity to negative outcomes (Higgins 1997). Thus, when individuals are in a promotion focus mindset, perceptions of sin might add to overall hedonic utility, whereas when individuals are in a prevention focus mindset, perceptions of sin might reduce overall hedonic utility. Individuals in a promotion mindset should be less inclined to choosing the mixed indulgence even when pleasure remains the same (relative to the pure indulgence).

Another individual difference moderator would be differences in impulsivity or chronic hedonic goals (Ramanathan 2002). For impulsive individuals, sin may add to overall hedonic utility whereas for prudent individuals, sin may reduce overall hedonic utility, leading impulsives to be less likely to choose a mixed indulgence relative to prudents because of the lack of sin in such mixed indulgences.

A final area of study is to extend this research to cover different kinds of mixed indulgences. So far, I have studied one kind of mixed indulgence: what I term as ‘hedonic-plus’ mixed indulgence in which utilitarian attributes are added to hedonic products. Other kinds of mixed indulgences include ‘hedonic-minus’ mixed indulgences in which hedonic attributes are ‘taken away’ from a pure indulgence (e.g. fat-free ice-cream, reduced-fat potato chips) and utilitarian-plus mixed indulgences in which hedonic attributes are added to utilitarian products (chocolate enriched fruit salad, yogurt ice-cream). Each of these mixes might be represented differently on the three-dimensional space. Hedonic-minus indulgences may be perceived as both less pleasurable and less sinful than pure indulgences while utilitarian-plus indulgences have been shown to be represented as just as pleasurable but less sinful than pure indulgences. This would affect choices in the way that pleasure and sin interact for each of these types of mixed indulgences, explaining why consumers may prefer one kind of mixed indulgence but not another.
REFERENCES


