

Necessary lattes? People short on self-control categorize more items as necessities

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The pathbreaking study by authors Cait Poynor (University of Pittsburgh) and Kelly L. Haws (Texas A&M University) is one of the first to try to understand why some people have more trouble than others regulating behaviors. It uncovers some important differences in the way people categorize "necessities" and "luxuries."

"The data demonstrates the basic differences among consumers in their tendency to embrace indulgence or restriction goals," explain the authors. "Even when pursuing the same goal, high and low self-control consumers create dramatically different categories of goal-consistent and goal-inconsistent options."

In three studies, the researchers examined the process individuals cycle through when trying to make a change. First, they select goals, then they form "implementation intentions," deciding which options and behaviors

are consistent with the goals. "For example, you might make a budget, deciding which items are necessities and which are luxuries, buy a diet book, which tells you which foods you may and may not eat, or organize your weekly schedule to include work sessions and time to participate in leisure activities," the authors explain.

"Importantly, results suggest that the goal pursuit process can appear to proceed smoothly but in fact be derailed during this second phase."

Where many people get tripped up is when their goals require them to overcome their default tendencies. For example, people the researchers categorized as having "low self-control" tended to do better with "indulgence goals," like enjoying purchases more. Individuals with higher self-control preferred "restriction goals," which led them to categorize fewer items as necessities.

"The most effective self-control interventions may vary depending on one's selfcontrol level and the nature of one's chosen goal," the authors conclude.

Source: University of Chicago

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