

Guilty pleasure? It's all in the mind's eye

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(PhysOrg.com) -- While many of us believe we need a good reason to enjoy a special luxury or splurge on something expensive, there really may be no such thing as a guilty pleasure, say University of Michigan researchers.

"Research suggests that consumers are unlikely to indulge themselves when they don't see good reasons to justify it, yet our findings consistently indicate that consumers' actual enjoyment of indulgences is independent of justification, in contrast to what consumers believe," said Norbert Schwarz, a marketing professor at Michigan's Ross School of Business who is also affiliated with U-M's Department of Psychology and Institute for Social Research.

In an article in the current issue of the *Journal of Marketing Research*, Schwarz and colleague Jing Xu, who now teaches at Peking University's Guanghua School of Management, reveal their findings from a series of studies that examine whether we really do need a reason to indulge.

The answer? Live it up, go for it, knock yourself out—just don't overthink it or you may start to feel guilty.

Consistent with prior research, Schwarz and Xu found that consumers expect less enjoyment and more guilt when they indulge themselves without a reason or simply to console themselves for a poor performance.

But their new research suggests that in the actual situation, the reason or

lack thereof, has no impact on our enjoyment nor does it matter if we indulged to console or reward ourselves. While indulging, the pleasures capture our attention and the justifications are not on our minds.

However, feelings are fleeting and a few days later we need to rely on reconstructive memory when we think about how we felt during our indulgence, the researchers say. The memories we reconstruct are more in line with our expectations than with our actual experience. In other words, if we believe that we'll feel guilty for indulging in one of life's simple pleasures—even if we actually don't—we may "remember" that we did.

In their studies, Schwarz and Xu surveyed hundreds of college students on various scenarios of indulgence—with vs. without a reason, as a reward for previous effort vs. as a consolation for poor performance, expectations vs. actual experience vs. recall of experience.

They found that consumers enjoy indulgences just as much when they had a reason for them than when they did not, and regardless of whether they were rewarding themselves for good performance or consoling themselves for a poor performance.

"In combination, our findings suggest that consumers' beliefs are erroneous," Schwarz said. "Actual enjoyment is driven by features of the consumption act itself, rather than by consumers' a priori beliefs. Indulgence is enjoyable independent of the presence or absence of a good justification."

Provided by University of Michigan

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