

Candy bar or healthy snack? Free choice not as free as we think

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If you think choosing between a candy bar and healthy snack is totally a matter of free will, think again. A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* shows that the choices we make to indulge ourselves or exercise self-control depend on how the choices are presented.

Author Juliano Laran (University of Miami) tested subjects to determine how certain words and concepts affected consumers' decisions for self-control or indulgence. He found that consumer choices were affected by the actions most recently suggested to them by certain key words.

The tests involved a word-scramble containing words that suggested either indulgence ("weight") or self-control ("delicious"). "Participants who unscrambled sentences associated with self-control were more likely to choose a healthy snack (a granola bar) to be consumed right now, but an indulgent snack (a chocolate bar) to be consumed in the future," writes Laran. Participants who unscrambled sentences associated with indulgence were more likely to choose an indulgent snack to be consumed right now but a [healthy snack](#) to be consumed in the future."

A second study examined the same phenomenon, but it involved information associated with saving versus [spending money](#). Again, when information about saving money was active (participants had been exposed to words associated with saving money), participants said that they imagined themselves trying to save money while [shopping](#) in the present, but spending a lot of money while shopping in the future. When

words about spending [money](#) were suggested, the study showed the opposite result.

"The type of information (self-control or indulgence) that is currently active may influence a decision for the future," write Laran. "When information about self-control (indulgence) is currently active, decisions for the present will be virtuous (indulgent), while decisions for the future will be indulgent (virtuous). This result arises from people's need to balance behaviors performed in the present with behaviors that will be performed in the future."

Both marketers and [consumers](#) can benefit from being aware of these effects, Laran concludes.

More information: Juliano Laran. "Choosing Your Future: Temporal Distance and the Balance Between Self-Control and Indulgence." [Journal of Consumer Research](#): April 2010 (published online September 24, 2009).

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