

'Big picture' thinking doesn't always lead people to indulge less, study says

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Buy the latest electronic gizmo du jour, or use that money to fix a leaky roof? Go out with friends, or stay home to catch-up on work to meet that looming deadline? And after you've finished that big project, do you treat yourself to a slice of chocolate cake or settle for a piece of fruit?

These are the kind of self-control dilemmas that people face all the time. And according to research from a University of Illinois expert in new product development and marketing, self-focus plays an important role in how [consumers](#) make decisions.

When prompted to think abstractly, too much self-focus can lead to feelings of missing out on life, which then induces regret and leads to corrective overindulgence – a finding that runs counter to much of the extant consumer psychology literature, says published research from Ravi Mehta, a professor of business administration.

"The classic line of research said that people are impulsive – they don't think long-term, they engage in indulgent, decadent behavior, and sometimes lose self-control," Mehta said. "A few years later, there was another stream of research that showed if people thought abstractly, they would begin to think more about their long-term financial well-being and wouldn't engage in hedonistic behaviors."

But Mehta and his co-authors found it all depends upon "how much you think about yourself in consumption situations."

"The role of the self in this whole phenomenon plays a very key role," he said. "If I were to ask you to imagine yourself 10 years from now, and then tempt you with indulgent behavior, that essentially grants you a license to indulge."

In the scenario above, why would a person give in to, say, a decadent dessert?

"Because you picture yourself 10 years from now – you have no idea where you will be, or what your situation will be like," Mehta said. "You start thinking about yourself in terms of long-term happiness. So you say to yourself, 'I'll live a little!' and give in to temptation. And that's because you are focusing on your own self at the expense of the big picture."

While the majority of research routinely criticizes consumers for being too impulsive, Mehta contends that consumers exhibit self-control the vast majority of time.

"You only remember the times when you've given in to your impulses," he said. "Even though most people have [self-control](#), it's just those few failures that you remember the most. And here we are saying, 'We control our everyday behavior, but we only indulge when we think long-term.' That's counterintuitive."

The study also asked a sample of consumers to compare their behavior in general to the average American consumer. The results indicate that 79 percent of people said they control their impulses most of the time. But 81 percent of respondents said U.S. consumers are impulsive people.

"So it's, 'I'm not impulsive and indulgent, but everyone else is,' which is interesting, because that was our starting point," Mehta said. "Generally, people are able to control themselves. But if they think of themselves 10 years in the future at a higher construal level, then they want to enjoy

life and, consequently, engage in deliberately indulgent behavior."

The research has implications for brands selling high-end products.

"To sell trendy or luxury goods, marketers and advertisers would be wise to focus on encouraging the consumer to self-focus on distant-future events," Mehta said.

The research is also relevant to public health or public policy campaigns.

"It's just the opposite – they would want to create copy that emphasizes near-future events," he said.

More information: The paper [www.carlsonschool.umn.edu/Dire ...ile.ashx/?pubid=8960](http://www.carlsonschool.umn.edu/Dire...ile.ashx/?pubid=8960).

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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