

**IRONIC EFFECTS OF GOAL ACTIVATION ON CHOICE**

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***PRELIMINARY DRAFT:  
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## ABSTRACT

Consumers often have multiple conflicting goals. For example, the same person may have the goal to “be healthy” as well as the goal to “indulge in delicious food.” A question that has not yet been addressed in the literature is how choices in the service of one goal (e.g., indulgence) are impacted when a conflicting goal (e.g., health) is activated prior to the choice. Consider, for example, a consumer who is choosing between desserts with the goal of indulging. Her options are chocolate ice cream and the restaurant’s specialty, the chocolate bombe, which she considers a tastier though less healthy special treat. How would her decision be affected if, prior to making her choice, she noticed a health magazine on a nearby table? My dissertation reveals that when an incidentally activated goal conflicts with consumers’ choice goal (as in this example), consumers can become *more* likely to choose the option in the set offering maximum attainment of the choice goal (e.g., the special treat). The effect is ironic because it demonstrates that incidental goal activation can *increase* choice of the option that conflicts *most* with the incidentally activated goal. I posit that this effect occurs because in such situations both choice options present a violation of the incidental goal (e.g., both desserts violate a goal to be healthy) and consumers will experience a need to justify this violation. Options that are easier to justify can be options that provide maximum goal attainment, when such options offer special or unique experiences (e.g., the special treat described above). A series of studies demonstrates these ironic effects using common consumer goals (i.e., savings and health) and outlines relevant boundary conditions. In support of my proposed mechanism, I provide evidence demonstrating that the effect of goal conflict on choice is mediated by consumers’ interest in special or unique options and I show that priming the need for justification has an analogous effect on consumer choices. I conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

Consider a consumer who is choosing between two desserts with the goal of enjoying a delicious indulgence. Would this consumer be more or less likely to order the better tasting yet less healthy of the options if prior to deciding she noticed a health magazine on a nearby table? While it is now well established that consumer choice is goal driven, relatively little is known about how the incidental activation of a goal that conflicts with the goal associated with the choice task (hereafter referred to as the “choice goal”) will affect consumer decisions. My dissertation investigates this question.

My dissertation draws on research on goal systems theory and behavioral decision theory to predict that when an incidental goal (e.g., health) that conflicts with the choice goal (e.g., to enjoy an indulgent treat) becomes activated prior to the choice, consumers will become *more* likely to choose the option in the set that offers maximum attainment of the choice goal (e.g., a more indulgent special treat) than when the conflicting goal is not activated. Thus I predict an ironic effect of goal activation on choice: Goal activation can *increase* choice of the option that conflicts *most* with that goal. I posit that this effect occurs because when an incidental goal conflicts with the choice goal, the available choice options will present a violation of the incidental goal. Thus when making their choice, consumers will experience the need to justify their incidental goal violation. Further, options providing maximum goal attainment may be easier to justify, when they offer the consumer a special or unique experience.

I demonstrate these effects across a series of studies. In support of the proposed underlying mechanism, I show that these results are driven by consumers’ desire to justify their choices: Consumers’ interest in options that present special or unique experiences mediates the proposed effect of incidentally activating a conflicting goal on choice.

Furthermore, priming the need for justification promotes the same pattern of choices as incidentally activating a conflicting goal. The findings have important implications for the study of goals and self-control. While my findings contrast with the general wisdom that incidental goal activation will lead to choices consistent with that goal (Bargh et al. 2001, Markman and Brendl 2000), I reconcile my results with these prior findings by showing that, when feasible, consumers make choices reflecting their incidentally activated goals. It is only when all available options violate the incidental goal that consumers exhibit these ironic effects.

The remainder of this dissertation is organized as follows. First, I briefly review research that motivates the prediction that incidentally activating a goal that conflicts with the consumers' choice goal will increase choice of an option offering maximum attainment of the choice goal. Then, in several studies, I investigate the main prediction by giving all participants a choice between two options that serve one choice goal (e.g., indulgent consumption or spending). Prior to making this choice, I manipulate whether a conflicting goal (e.g., health or savings) is activated. I find the predicted pattern of conflicting goal activation increasing choice of the option offering maximum attainment of the choice goal. In later studies, I test for alternate accounts and find support for an explanation based on goal conflict and an increased need for justification. I conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

It is now well established that consumers make choices in line with their active goals (cf. Bagozzi and Dholakia 1999). To understand the effects of goal activation on choice, I

turn to goal systems theory. Kruglanski and colleagues (2002) advanced a theory of goal systems describing consumers' many goals as a network of inter-connected nodes. The authors describe this network as having standard cognitive properties, such that there are facilitative links between goals and the means that service them; thus, goal activation increases the accessibility of the means that service the goal. Further, there are inhibitory links between conflicting goals; thus, goal activation suppresses the accessibility of conflicting goals. In support of this framework, researchers have demonstrated that goal activation causes consumers to evaluate goal-relevant objects more positively (Ferguson and Bargh 2004) and to devalue goal-irrelevant objects (Brendl, Markman and Messner 2003). Likewise, consumers "shield" active goals by suppressing alternate goals (Shah et al. 2002, Shah and Kruglanski 2002) and make choices reflecting their goal commitment (Fishbach, Dhar and Zhang 2006).

While most goals research has examined how the activation of a single goal affects subsequent choices and evaluations, in reality consumers maintain multiple goals that interact to affect their decisions (Fishbach and Dhar 2005). When discussing how consumers hold conflicting goals, a question that may naturally arise is how the activation of a goal unrelated to the choice at hand (e.g., incidental goal activation), will impact consumers' decisions when the goal associated with the choice conflicts with the incidentally activated goal. In this dissertation, when the primary goal that consumers associate with the choice options is the same for all options in a choice set, I refer to this as the "choice goal." Choice goals can be activated in a top down fashion; for example, a consumer may have an explicit goal of indulging when choosing among chocolate bars. Conversely, choice goals be activated from the bottom up, based on the choice set (e.g., if a consumer in a steakhouse was choosing

among several delicious but unhealthy steaks, her choice goal could be one of enjoying a tasty meal).

Although the question of how conflict between consumers' incidentally activated goal and their choice goal will affect decisions has not been directly studied to date, prior work might suggest certain predictions. Goal systems theory argues that consumers prefer to make choices that support their active goals (Kruglanski et al. 2002). From this perspective, one might expect that activating any goal (conflicting or not) would move choices towards the option in the set that best meets this activated goal (Markman and Brendl 2000). For example, this would suggest that the incidental activation of a health goal prior to a choice among desserts would increase choice of the most healthy (or least unhealthy) dessert.

Research on "goal pull" (Shah and Kruglanski 2002) makes a similar prediction, but for slightly different reasons. These authors argue that all goal activation stems from the same limited resource. Thus when consumers have a focal goal (e.g., to enjoy an indulgent treat) the activation of any alternate goal (e.g., health) would pull activation away from the focal goal, towards the alternate goal. As a result, consumers would be less likely to maximize on the focal goal. Using the prior example, this again suggests that incidentally activating a health goal would increase choice of the most healthy (or least unhealthy) dessert.

Finally, one might expect the consciously-held choice goal to be impervious to subtle, unrelated influences (i.e., non-conscious, incidental goal priming) (Simonson 2005).

Simonson (2005) argues that as the majority of real consumer choices involves conscious deliberation, conscious aspects of the choice (e.g., product attributes) will exert greater influence on decisions than non-conscious factors (e.g., contextual priming). On this basis,

one might expect non-conscious, incidental goal activation to exert no effect on the conscious choices studied here.

In contrast to these predictions, I argue that incidental goal activation can ironically increase choice of the option that *best* serves the choice goal. One consequence of the conflict between the choice goal and the incidentally activated goal is that any choice will violate the incidental goal (e.g., choosing any indulgent chocolate bar will violate a goal to be healthy). I argue that this impending goal violation will increase consumers' need to justify their choice. I base this prediction on research on reason based choice (Shafir, Simonson and Tversky 1993). This research demonstrates that consumers experiencing conflict in choice tend to shift their focus from the choice alternatives themselves to the reasons that support each alternative (Briley, Morris and Simonson 2000; Simonson and Nowlis 2000). For example, consumers who experience conflict while making difficult tradeoffs are more likely to opt for compromise options or options that dominate one of the alternatives as those options are easiest to justify (Simonson 1989). Likewise, consumers experiencing emotional conflict during choice (e.g., indulgence guilt) may expend personal effort as a means to justify their decision (Kivetz and Zheng 2006), or may opt for indulgences providing a "functional alibi" (e.g., a small utilitarian feature added to a luxury product) in an effort to justify their purchase (Keinan, Kivetz and Netzer 2008).

Building on this prior research, I will show that goal conflict can likewise promote the need for justification. Further, I will demonstrate that in these situations the need for justification favors the option that provides maximum goal fulfillment, such as highly indulgent products that provide maximal attainment of the conscious choice goal, over more moderately indulgent products. This occurs because when all available options violate the

incidental goal, options offering maximum attainment of the choice goal can present special or unique experiences (Dhar and Simonson 1999), which can justify committing a goal violation. On the basis of this discussion I offer the following two hypotheses:

H1: Consumers who have an incidentally activated goal that conflicts with their choice goal will be more likely to choose an option offering maximum attainment of the choice goal.

H2: The effect of incidental goal activation on choice of the option offering maximum attainment of the choice goal will be mediated by increased interest in special or unique options.

This conceptual framework suggests an important boundary condition. While prior research has demonstrated that incidentally activating a goal increases choice the option that is most consistent with that goal, I suggest the opposite pattern will occur when consumers make a choice among options that violate their incidental goal. I will reconcile these seemingly inconsistent findings by demonstrating the importance of the choice set in determining how incidental goal activation will affect choices. I argue that I will observe ironic effects of goal activation on choice when all choice options violate the incidental goal, because in such situations consumers will experience the need for justification. When one or more items in the choice set are viewed as feasible means for pursuing the incidental goal, I predict consumer preferences will show assimilation to the incidental goal, such that goal activation will increase choice of goal consistent options.

My theory argues that goal conflict will trigger the need to justify one's goal violation, which in turn will increase interest in special or unique options as such options are easier to justify. Thus, this framework predicts there can be ironic effects of incidental goal activation on choice whereby the incidental activation of one goal (e.g., health) will increase choice of

the option that best meets a conflicting choice goal (e.g., indulgence) only when the option that best meets the choice goal presents a special or unique experience. As irony is not a necessary component of the mechanism, I argue that these effects can extend beyond ironic effects and that goal conflict can broadly increase interest in options that present a justification for violating one's incidental goal. For example, choice of options that can be seen as special or unique due to their attributes (e.g., exotic flavors) or options that offer uncommonly positive experiences (e.g., high end luxuries or indulgences) should increase under goal conflict. This leads to my final hypothesis:

H3: Consumers who have an incidentally activated goal that conflicts with their choice goal will be more likely to choose an option that is easier to justify.

These predictions are tested in a series of studies (see Figure 1). Study 1 demonstrates my proposed effect. Study 2 demonstrates an important boundary condition showing these ironic effects only occur when none of the options in the choice set allow for pursuit of the incidentally activated goal. Testing for the mechanism behind this effect, Study 3 replicates these ironic effects with real choices, showing that the effect of incidental goal activation on choice is mediated by interest in special or unique options. Study 4 further examines the underlying process and rules out an alternate account for the pattern of results. Finally, in Study 5, I manipulate whether external prompts to justify a choice result in similar effects.

-- Insert Figure 1 Here --

### **Study 1: Ironic Effects of Goal Activation on Choice**

#### **Method**

One hundred and twenty nine students from a northeastern university were presented with two seemingly unrelated tasks. For the first task, participants were randomly assigned to either a savings goal prime condition or a control condition. Participants in the savings goal prime (control) condition were shown pictures of six book covers and were asked to indicate which (if any) of the books they had read.<sup>1</sup> In the savings goal prime condition, three of the books were relevant to the goal of saving money, whereas in the control condition all of the books were unrelated to the goal of saving money. After reviewing the book covers, all participants were asked to reference one book (Savings goal prime = *How to Save Money Every Day*; Control = *The Wright Brothers*) and write a short paragraph answering the question: “Why is this book more popular now than ever?”

All participants then moved on to the choice task, which was presented as a separate study. The choice task was designed to conflict with a goal of saving money. Participants were instructed to imagine that they were going to take a luxurious vacation in Puerto Vallarta over a long weekend. They were then presented with pictures and descriptions of two vacation packages: a more expensive “special treat,” the Puerto Vallarta Resort and Spa, and a less special, less expensive option, the Villa Nuevo Vallarta. A pretest confirmed that the more expensive Puerto Vallarta Resort and Spa was reliably rated as more of a “special treat” (scale: 1 – not at all to 9 – very much;  $M_{Resort} = 7.9$ ,  $M_{Villa} = 6.6$ ,  $t(1, 35) = 5.76$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The main dependent variable was their choice of vacation package.

## Results and Discussion

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<sup>1</sup> In all studies no participants indicated that they had read any of the books in either condition.

H1 predicts that respondents in the savings goal prime condition would be more likely to select the option offering maximum attainment of the choice goal (enjoying a luxurious weekend getaway). Consistent with this hypothesis, participants in the savings goal prime condition were more likely to choose the more luxurious, “special treat” (a stay at the Puerto Vallarta Resort and Spa) than those in the control condition ( $P_{savings} = 68\%$ ,  $P_{control} = 46\%$ ,  $\chi^2(1) = 6.3$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ), despite the fact that this option was more expensive and thus posed greater conflict to their incidentally activated savings goal. In a separate study (using the same manipulation), different participants were asked to imagine that they were making a choice between two expensive luxury rental cars for a weekend getaway: one being more expensive, but also having superior features. The effect replicated and was significant ( $P_{savings} = 75\%$ ,  $P_{control} = 35\%$ ,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.6$ ;  $p = 0.032$ ).

In support of H1, Study 1 demonstrates that consumers with an incidentally activated goal that conflicted with their choice goal were more likely to choose the option offering maximum attainment of the choice goal. I argue that this is because that option offered “special treat,” which provided a justification for the incidental goal violation. Although these results demonstrate an ironic effect of incidental goal activation on choice, most goals research has shown that incidental goal activation leads to choices consistent with that goal. I propose that ironic effects will only occur when all choice options violate the incidentally activated goal, as incidental goal violation is necessary to trigger the need for justification. When the choice options do not violate the incidentally activated goal and instead provide a feasible means for pursuit of the incidental goal (e.g., a health goal is incidentally activated and healthy options are made available), I predict preferences will be consistent with the incidentally activated goal (e.g., increased choice of healthy options). Study 2 will test for

this proposed interaction by manipulating the incidentally activated goal and whether or not the choice options violate the incidentally activated goal.

## **Study 2: Reconciling Ironic Effects and Goal Consistency**

### **Method**

*Pretests.* Two pretests were conducted to identify one pair of options where both options *violated* a health goal, and a second pair of options within the same product category where both options *did not violate* a health goal. In the first pretest, participants were asked to imagine a regular sized chocolate bar they might see in a convenience store, then to imagine that the chocolate bar contained various calorie amounts. For each calorie amount, they were asked to indicate if they would consider the chocolate bar ‘healthy’ or ‘unhealthy.’

Participants then provided binary responses (healthy or unhealthy) for calorie amounts ranging from 100 calories to 600 calories in 50 calorie increments. The results of this pretest ( $n = 53$ ) showed that 90% of participants considered chocolate bars under 200 calories to be “healthy,” whereas 90% of participants considered chocolate bars over 350 calories to be “unhealthy.” Based on these results, I designed the stimuli for a second pretest. Participants in a second pretest ( $n = 53$ ) were asked to rate how indulgent (vs. healthy) a series of chocolate bars were on a 5 point bipolar scale anchored at 1 – very healthy and 5 – very indulgent (midpoint = neither healthy nor indulgent). The mean ratings for chocolate bars with 485 calories and 418 calories exceeded the neutral point ( $M_{485} = 4.49$ ,  $t(1, 52) = 12.82$ ,  $M_{418} = 4.37$ ,  $t(1, 52) = 12.89$ ;  $p$ 's  $< 0.001$ ). Ratings for a chocolate bar with 118 calories fell significantly below the neutral point ( $M_{118} = 2.44$ ,  $t(1, 52) = -4.11$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Ratings for a chocolate bar with 185 calories approximated the neutral point ( $M_{185} = 2.9$ ).

In the main study, one hundred and six female students from a northeastern university were randomly assigned to one of four conditions based on a 2 (health goal vs. control) X 2 (choice set: high calorie vs. low calorie) design. I replicated the experimental paradigm used in Study 1, activating a health goal with the same priming mechanism. For the choice task, half of the participants made a choice between two options that violated a health goal (high calorie chocolate bars: 485 calories and 415 calories). The remaining half of participants made a choice between two options that did not violate a health goal (low calorie chocolate bars: 185 calories and 118 calories). The main dependent variable was their choice of chocolate bar.

## **Results and Discussion**

I predicted that the one's choice set (high calorie vs. low calorie) would moderate the effect of incidental health goal activation on choice of the higher calorie option. Consistent with H1 and the results thus far, among participants who made choices between two high calorie chocolate bars (where both options violate the incidental goal), participants primed with a health goal were significantly more likely to chose the more indulgent, higher calorie option than those in the control condition (57% vs. 22%). In contrast, when participants made choices of low calorie chocolate bars that did not violate the health goal, participants primed with a health goal were *less* likely to choose the more indulgent, higher calorie option than those in the control condition (33% vs. 50%).

-- Insert Figure 2 Here --

To test my prediction that having a health goal will increase the share of the more indulgent option only when there is no goal consistent option in the set, I ran a binary logistic

regression analysis of the choice of the more indulgent option within the set as a function of three independent variables, a dummy for goal (health goal vs. control) and the choice set (high calorie vs. low calorie) and the interaction between the two. As predicted, the interaction between the goal and the choice set was significant ( $\beta = 2.262$ , Wald = 7.056,  $p = 0.008$ ).

These results demonstrate a boundary condition for the ironic effects observed thus far: Both choice options must violate the incidentally activated goal in order to obtain ironic effects of goal activation on choice. As the results of Study 2 show, when the choice options do not violate the incidental goal (e.g. a choice among low calorie chocolate bars does not violate a health goal), we observe incidental goal priming increasing choice of goal consistent options (e.g., the lower calorie chocolate bar). These results reconcile the effects observed thus far with standard findings from the goals literature on the effects of goal activation.

Studies 1 and 2 demonstrate that consumers experiencing goal conflict were more likely to choose options that offered maximum attainment of the choice goal (e.g., luxury and indulgence). Although these studies did not test this directly, H2 predicts that the effect of incidental goal activation on choice of the option offering maximum attainment of the choice goal will be mediated by increased interest in special or unique options. Study 3 is designed to test for this, by manipulating goal conflict and measuring consumers' interest in special or unique options. Further, Study 3 was designed to address two limitations of the prior studies. Participants in Studies 1 and 2 made hypothetical choices. To extend the ecological validity of these results, participants in Study 3 were given real, consequential choices. While in Studies 1 and 2 it was assumed that the incidental goal prime activated the goal as intended, the studies did not test for this empirically. As such one might argue, that the effects of

priming on choice could have been driven by something other than the incidental activation of the goal (e.g., in Study 1 one might argue the concept of “money” was primed, as opposed to the goal to save). To address this second limitation, a manipulation check was included in this study to confirm that the incidental goal prime was activating the incidental goal. Thus, Study 3 had three main objectives: (1) to test for the proposed mediator, (2) to extend the ecological validity of these findings and (3) to replicate the findings with a manipulation check of incidental goal activation.

### **Study 3: Mediation and Real Choices**

#### **Method**

Thirty five female students at a northeastern university were presented with two seemingly unrelated studies. The first study was a health goal prime (control) identical to that used in Study 2. After completing the initial task, all participants were given a choice task, which was presented as compensation for participation. Participants read instructions stating, “Time for a little indulgence! To thank you for participating in the studies up to this point, we would like to offer you your choice of one of the two donuts below.” They were then offered their choice of an ultimate rich chocolate frosted + drizzle donut or a glazed donut. Pretesting confirmed that both donuts were considered more indulgent than healthy (scale: 1 – very healthy to 5 – very indulgent;  $M_{drizzle} = 4.6$ ,  $t(1, 13) = 6.62$ ,  $M_{glazed} = 4.0$ ,  $t(1, 13) = 4.84$ ;  $p$ 's < 0.001). Additionally, the ultimate rich chocolate frosted + drizzle donut was seen as significantly more unhealthy than the glazed donut (scale: 1 – not at all healthy to 9 – very healthy;  $M_{drizzle} = 2.1$ ,  $M_{glazed} = 3.0$ ,  $t(1, 13) = 3.29$ ;  $p = 0.005$ ). After making their choice,

participants turned the page and were informed that they could pick up their donut as they exited the lab.

Participants were then given a goal listing task that was designed to function as a manipulation check. Instructions informed participants: “Please list five goals that you currently have. These goals should be goals that are important to you currently that you use to prioritize and guide your actions.” This manipulation check was designed based on prior research that has demonstrated that when a goal (e.g., health) is active, consumers asked to report their goals will be more likely to cite goals related to the active goal (e.g., dieting) as opposed to unrelated goals (e.g., academic achievement) (Shah et al. 2002).

After completing the goal listing task, participants provided ratings on a series of additional measures, including mood (1 – very bad; 9 – very good) and current hunger level (1 – not at all hungry; 9 – very hungry). Finally, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which each reason on a list of reasons influenced their donut choice. Two of these reasons were relevant to my proposed mediator: “I wanted something unusual and different” and “the option I chose seemed like a special treat.” The other two reasons were fillers (e.g., the variety I chose was my favorite). Participants rated the extent to which each reason influenced their choices on scales anchored at 1 – not at all and 5 – very much.

## **Results and Discussion**

The results of the manipulation check suggest that priming task did incidentally activate the health goal as intended. Participants in the health goal prime condition were significantly more likely to mention a health related goal in the goal listing task than those in the control condition ( $P_{health} = 63\%$ ,  $P_{control} = 31\%$ ,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.6$ ;  $p = 0.05$ ).

In accordance with my proposed mechanism, I predicted the effect of incidental goal activation on choice of the option offering maximum attainment of the choice goal would be mediated by interest in options that are viewed as special and unique. To test for this, participants' ratings for statements suggesting they interested in special or unique options ("I wanted something unusual and different" and "the option I chose seemed like a special treat") were averaged to create a composite measure ( $R = 0.69$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). Consistent with my proposed explanation, the data fulfilled the criteria for a mediation model: First, goal activation (incidentally activated health goal vs. control) had a significant effect on the composite measure ( $\beta = 1.202$ , S.E. = 0.386,  $p = 0.004$ ). That is when participants' incidentally activated goal conflicted with their choice goal they gave stronger endorsement to statements indicating they were interested in special or unique options. Second, there was a significant effect of goal activation on choice ( $P_{health} = 74\%$ ,  $P_{control} = 37\%$ ;  $\beta = 1.540$ , S.E. = 0.734,  $p = 0.036$ ). Replicating the prior results with real choices, when a conflicting goal was incidentally activated prior to choice, participants became more likely to choose the option offering maximal attainment of the choice goal (the more indulgent and less healthy ultimate rich chocolate frosted + drizzle donut). Also, the composite measure significantly affected choice ( $\beta = 1.103$ , S.E. = 0.395,  $p = 0.005$ ). Finally, when choice was regressed on both goal activation and the composite measure, the coefficient for goal activation was no longer significant ( $\beta = 0.721$ , S.E. = 0.851,  $p = 0.387$ ), whereas the coefficient for the composite measure remained significant ( $\beta = 0.991$ , S.E. = 0.416,  $p = 0.017$ ). These results were supported by the Sobel test ( $p = 0.05$ ).

The results of this mediation test are consistent with my account that incidentally activating a goal that conflicts with the choice goal increases consumers' interest in special or

unique options, and that this increase in interest in special or unique options underlies the ironic effects of goal activation on choice observed thus far. Incidental goal activation did not have a significant effect on any of the other additional measures (e.g., hunger), nor did any of those measures mediate the effect of incidental goal activation on choice.

These results demonstrate support for H1 and H2. Using real choices, I observed that incidentally activating a conflicting health goal increased choice of the option offering maximal attainment of the choice goal (e.g., the more indulgent donut). Further, these results demonstrate support for my proposed mediator: interest in special or unique options fully mediated the effect of incidental goal activation on choices. Study 4 was designed to build on these findings by testing an alternative explanation for the pattern of results observed thus far. Studies 1 – 3 demonstrate that incidentally activating a conflicting goal increased choice of the option offering maximal attainment of the choice goal; however, in these studies the option offering maximal attainment of the choice goal was always the option that presented a greater violation of the incidental goal (e.g., the more indulgent, less healthy donut in Study 3). This was an intentional aspect of the design in order to test if incidental goal activation can have an ironic effect on choices; however, my proposed process does not always produce ironic effects.

My theory specifies that when consumers experience goal conflict and must choose an option that violates their incidental goal, they will seek to justify their goal violation and will thus be drawn to options supported by the best reasons (e.g., options that present special or unique experiences). When the special or unique option is the option that presents a greater violation of the incidental goal, the effects will be ironic (as in Studies 1 – 3); however, they need not be. My framework suggests that consumers experiencing goal conflict will be drawn

to special or unique options, regardless of whether or not those options present a greater violation of the incidentally activated goal. Study 4 will test this directly. If my framework holds, goal conflict will increase choice of the special or unique option regardless of if that option presents a greater violation. These results would effectively rule out any alternative accounts for the pattern of results observed thus far suggesting that these effects are driven by goal conflict increasing consumers' interest in whatever option maximally violates the incidental goal (e.g., a reactance argument).

#### **Study 4: Choosing the Unique Option vs. the Maximum Violation**

##### **Method**

Two hundred and one female students from an online participant pool were randomly assigned to one of four conditions based on a 2 (prime: health goal vs. control) X 2 (unique option: greater violation vs. lesser violation) design. This study used the same procedure as Study 2, activating a health goal with the same priming mechanism. For the choice task, all participants were asked to imagine that they had decided to indulge with a box of chocolates. Next they were provided with pictures and descriptions of two different boxes of chocolate and asked to make a choice. One option represented a greater violation of the incidental health goal (42 pieces of chocolate) and one option represented a slightly lesser violation (36 pieces of chocolate). For half of the participants, the option that represented the greater violation was also designed to appear more unique. Specifically, the flavors were described as “diverse” and the chocolate box was a non-standard shape. The option that represented the lesser violation was designed to appear more standard: The flavors were described as “classic and standard” and the chocolate box had a conventional appearance. This was reversed for

the remaining half of the participants, such that the unique option presented the lesser violation (36 pieces) and the standard option presented the greater violation (42 pieces). The dependent variable was participants' choice of chocolate box.

## **Results and Discussion**

Consistent with H1 and the results observed thus far, when the unique option presented a greater violation to the incidental goal (42 pieces), participants in the health goal prime condition were ironically more likely to choose the more unique but less healthy option (88% vs. 75%). However, in line with my proposed mechanism, when the unique option presented a lesser violation of the incidental goal (36 pieces), I observed the same pattern of results: Here health goal activation likewise increased choice of the unique option (76% vs. 61%).

-- Insert Figure 3 Here --

To test my prediction that goal conflict will increase choice of the greater violation only when the option that presents a greater violation is supported by the best reasons (e.g., presents a unique or special experience), I ran a binary logistic regression analysis of the choice of the greater violation as a function of three independent variables, a dummy for the incidentally activated goal (prime: health goal vs. control), the choice set manipulation (unique option: greater violation vs. lesser violation) and the interaction between the two. As predicted, the interaction between the goal and the choice set was significant ( $\beta = 1.557$ , Wald = 4.99,  $p = 0.025$ ).

These results demonstrate that the effects of goal conflict on choice are not exclusively ironic. Rather, goal conflict will lead to ironic choices only when the option that is supported

by the best justification (e.g., it presents a special or unique experience) presents a greater violation of the incidental goal. To further shed light on this justification mechanism, Study 5 will test if an external prompt to justify one's choice will lead to a similar pattern of choice as the activation of a conflicting goal. Prior research has demonstrated that when consumers are asked to provide reasons for their choices, it shifts choice towards options that are easiest to justify (Simonson and Nowlis 2000). As H3 predicts that consumers who have an incidentally activated goal that conflicts with their choice goal will be more likely to choose an option that is easier to justify, this study provides a test of this prediction. If my framework holds, then participants experiencing goal conflict and participants who are not experiencing goal conflict but who are primed the need to justify their choice should be drawn to similar choice options.

### **Study 5: The Role of Justification in Choice**

#### **Method**

Four hundred and four female students from an online participant pool were randomly assigned to one of four conditions based on a 2 (prime: health goal vs. control) X 2 (additional justification: required vs. not required) design. This study used the same procedure as Study 2, activating a health goal with the same priming mechanism. For the choice task, all participants were given pictures and descriptions of two chocolate bars priced at \$4.99 and \$2.99. Pretesting confirmed that the higher priced chocolate bar was reliably rated as more of a "special treat" ( $M_{\$4.99} = 6.36$ ,  $M_{\$2.99} = 4.93$ ,  $t(1, 27) = 3.84$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). For half of the participants, prior to making their choice, they were asked to provide a written justification for their decision. Following Simonson and Nowlis (2000), they were instructed, "Before you

make your choice, we will ask you to explain your decision. *Briefly explain why you are selecting the option that you intend to choose.*” The remaining participants received no such instruction. The main dependent variable was choice of the “special treat” in the choice task.

## Results and Discussion

Consistent with H1 and the results observed thus far, when no additional justification was required, participants in the health goal prime condition, who were experiencing goal conflict, were significantly more likely to select the choice goal maximizing “special treat” ( $P_{health} = 37\%$ ,  $P_{control} = 24\%$ ,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.0$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ). H3 predicts that consumers with an incidentally activated goal that conflicts with their choice goal will be more likely to choose an option that is easier to justify. Relevant to this prediction, among participants in the control condition, those who were asked to provide a written justification for their choice were more likely to select the “special treat” than those who were not asked to provide a written justification ( $P_{justification} = 37\%$ ,  $P_{no justification} = 24\%$ ,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.2$ ,  $p = 0.07$ ). This result suggests that in the absence of goal conflict the “special treat” was seen as the option that was easier to justify. The justification manipulation had no effect on participants who were primed with a health goal ( $P_{no justification} = 37\%$ ,  $P_{justification} = 36\%$ ,  $p > 0.88$ ).

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To test my prediction that providing a written justification will increase choice of the “special treat” only in the absence of goal conflict, I ran a binary logistic regression analysis of the choice of the “special treat” as a function of three independent variables, a dummy for the incidentally activated goal (prime: health goal vs. control), the justification manipulation (written justification: required vs. not required) and the interaction between the two. As

predicted, the interaction between the goal and the choice set suggests this was the case ( $\beta = -.676$ , Wald = 2.43,  $p = 0.1$ ). Additionally, there were main effects of the goal manipulation ( $\beta = .632$ , Wald = 3.88,  $p = 0.045$ ) and the justification manipulation ( $\beta = .592$ , Wald = 3.16,  $p = 0.075$ ); suggesting that consumers experiencing goal conflict and consumers who were asked to justify their choices were more likely to choose the “special treat.”

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Although consumers possess multiple goals, some of which may be conflicting, most research to date has examined how the activation of one goal affects valuations and choices. Everyday consumers must make a number of choices when unrelated or conflicting goals may be active. In this dissertation I examine what happens when there is conflict between consumers’ choice goal and their incidentally activated goal, in an effort to build an understanding of how consumers make decisions under goal conflict. The studies demonstrate ironic effects of goal activation, whereby incidentally activating a goal that conflicts with the choice goal increases consumers’ likelihood of choosing the option offering maximal attainment of the choice goal (Studies 1 – 5). I show that this pattern of results can be obtained only when the choice goal and the incidentally activated goal conflict and I identify the availability of goal consistent options as a boundary condition for this effect (Study 2). Finally, I show support for my proposed mechanism by demonstrating that interest in special or unique options mediates the effect of incidental goal activation on choice (Study 3) and by showing that priming the need for justification can promote analogous effects among those not already experiencing goal conflict (Study 5).

The experiments presented here weaken an argument that licensing (Khan and Dhar 2006) or a sense of goal progress (Fishbach, Dhar and Zhang 2006) might provide alternate explanations for these ironic effects. The licensing effect demonstrates that an initial virtuous action can sanction subsequent indulgence (Khan and Dhar 2006). One might argue that completion of the goal prime could constitute a virtuous action, thus explaining these effects. Likewise, the research on goal progress shows that when an initial action is interpreted as indicating goal progress, consumers become more likely to disengage from the focal goal and pursue an alternate goal (Fishbach, Dhar and Zhang 2006). However, both licensing and goal progress are believed to be contingent on an initial virtuous / goal relevant action. The goal primes used here never required any choices or behaviors in service of the active goal. Further, neither a licensing nor a goal progress account can explain the results of Studies 3 - 5, where conflict between the incidentally activated goal and the choice goal increased interest in special or unique options and options that are generally regarded as easier to justify.

While research in decision making has demonstrated that the need to justify one's choices can shift consumers' focus from the options themselves to the reasons that support them (Briley, Morris and Simonson 2000, Simonson and Nowlis 2000), prior research has focused only on external manipulations of the need for justification. I argue that when there is a conflict between a consumer's choice goal and her incidentally activated goal, she will naturally experience a need to justify her choice (in an effort to justify the goal violation). Thus, this dissertation suggests an organic and common place occurrence whereby the need for justification might naturally be triggered in consumers. As the need for justification can affect consumer decisions and shift preference towards options that are supported by the best

reasons, this research has clear implications for marketers seeking to maximize their understanding of consumer decision processes at the point of choice.

My studies manipulated consumers' incidentally activated goals and then assessed the impact of conflict between the incidentally activated goal and the choice goal on subsequent choice. Future research could examine the downstream effects of these ironic choices on future goal pursuit. For example, if a consumer with an incidentally activated goal (e.g., health) chooses an option that best serves her conflicting choice goal (e.g., an indulgent chocolate bar) and is then given a choice between a goal consistent option and a goal conflicting option (e.g., a reward of a gym pass vs. a gift certificate for a pizza restaurant), would we observe subsequent choices in line with the incidentally activated health goal? My theory would argue that as consumers demonstrating these ironic effects are choosing the option that they believe is supported by the best reasons, they will neither experience negative affect nor a sense of goal violation that would prompt subsequent goal disengagement. I hope that the current research will prompt future inquiry into this area.

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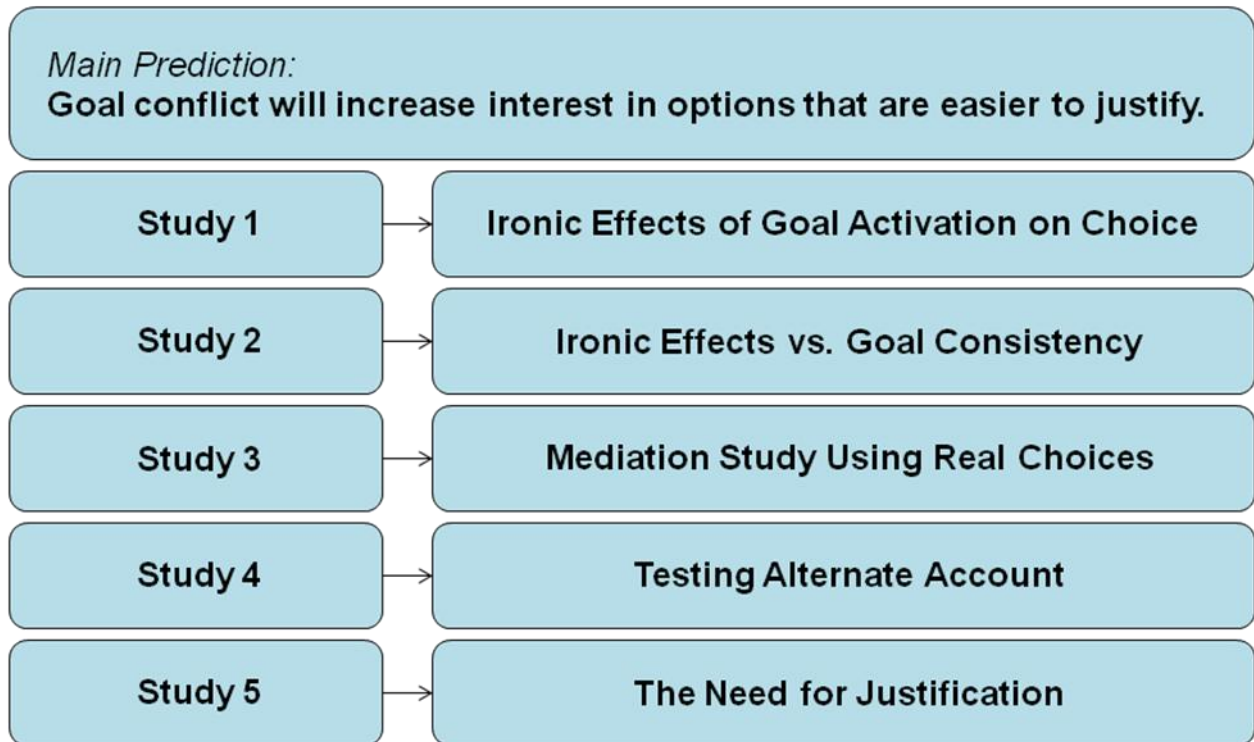
Figure 1: *Road Map*

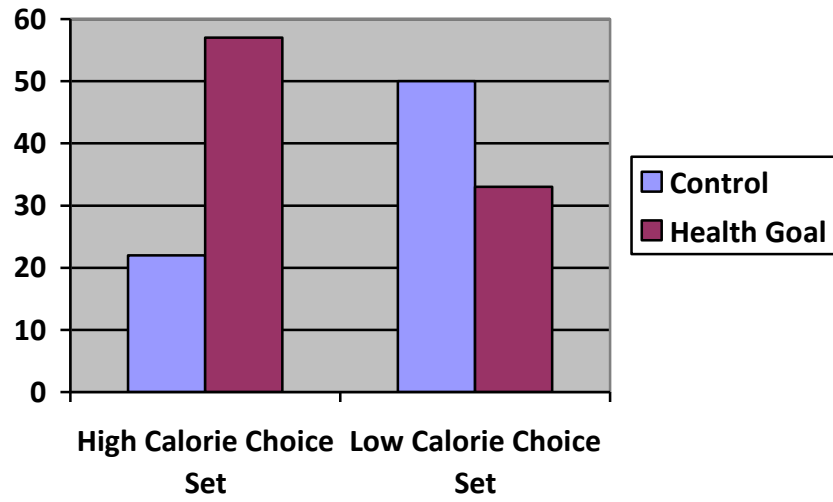
Figure 2: *Study 2 – Results***Percentage of Participants Choosing the Higher Calorie Chocolate Bar**

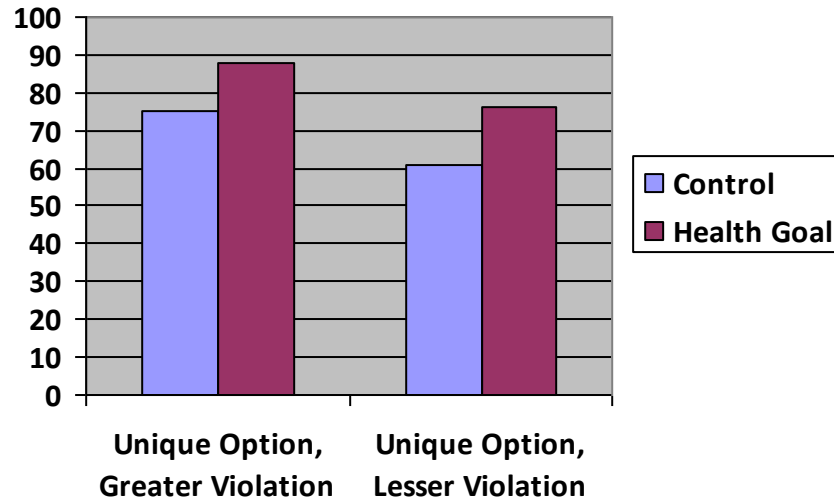
Figure 3: *Study 4 – Results***Percentage of Participants Choosing the Unique Option**

Figure 4: *Study 5 – Results***Percentage of Participants Choosing the “Special Treat”**