Ironic Effects of Goal Activation on Choice

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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? The current research 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. We 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 the proposed mechanism, we provide evidence demonstrating that the effect of goal conflict on choice is mediated by consumers’ interest in special or unique options and we show that priming the need for justification has an analogous effect on consumer choices. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.