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Contact: Mary-Ann Twist / 608-255-5582 / JCR@bus.wisc.edu

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Forced to Be Bad: When Eating That Chocolate Cake is “Not Our Fault”?

Imagine you’re dining out with a friend who insists on sharing some chocolate cake for dessert. Since the decision has already been made for you, you gladly join in without feeling any regret. According to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#), consumers are happier when someone else decides they can indulge in dessert or other guilty pleasures.



“Most of us don’t like being forced to do things. The freedom to make our own decisions generally energizes us and increases our sense of well-being. However, when it comes to purchasing and consuming products normally associated with feelings of guilt, reducing someone’s sense of free choice could ultimately boost their overall well-being,” write authors Fangyuan Chen and Jaideep Sengupta (both Hong Kong University of Science and Technology).

In one study, a group of consumers was asked to read a book that was either entertaining or educational. These consumers were either able to choose the book themselves or simply given one of the two books. Consumers who read the educational book experienced equal levels of guilt, vitality, and creativity regardless of whether they had chosen or were given the book. However, consumers who were given the entertaining book experienced significantly less guilt and much higher vitality and creativity than those who had freely chosen the entertaining book.

Companies offering luxury products can use these results to help consumers deflect their spending decisions and feel better about splurging on expensive purchases. Meanwhile, businesses that sell indulgent products can help consumers enjoy their “guilty pleasures.” Consumers will feel less guilt and enjoy themselves more if they don’t feel responsible for an indulgence such as an unhealthy but delicious dessert.

“In an effort to avoid punishment, children will say someone else ‘made them’ break the rules. As it turns out, this evasion of responsibility also works surprisingly well for adults and may carry substantial benefits for consumers,” the authors conclude.

Fangyuan Chen and Jaideep Sengupta. “Forced to Be Bad: The Positive Impact of Low-Autonomy Vice Consumption on Consumer Vitality.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: December 2014. For more information, contact Fangyuan Chen (fangyuan@ust.hk) or visit <http://ejcr.org/>.

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