

“Strategic Indulgence: Self-Imposition of Moral Liability as a Self-Control Strategy”

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ABSTRACT

We propose a novel consumer self-control strategy, self-imposing moral liability. Consumers purposely engage in tempting hedonic activities to increase their motivation to perform subsequent tasks that require self-control. For example, students might prefer to attend a party the night before starting to study for an important exam. Or consider people’s indulgences during Carnival, which immediately precedes Lent. Building on mental accounting, we show that consumers choose the hedonic behavior to self-impose a moral liability that can be canceled by persisting in the self-control task. Five experiments provide support and rule out alternative explanations based on licensing, balancing, self-handicapping, and ego depletion.