Don’t Succumb to my Temptations: Social Avoidance as a Strategy to Protect Valued Goals

Jessica Gamburg & Maferima Touré-Tillery

Kellogg School of Management • Northwestern University

Literature Review & Abstract

How do we socially interact with someone who is indulging in a tempting piece of chocolate cake? Do we approach or avoid them, and why? Some research suggests we may approach and befriend indulgers (Helmsreic, Aronson, & LeFan, 1976; Lowe & Hans, 2014; Rawn & Vohs, 2011; Tesser, 1988). Other research suggests we may devalue and avoid indulgers (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Levin, 1935; Myers, Fishbain, & Trope, 2009; Rosenberg, 1956). We explore a novel mechanism for social avoidance of indulgers: influence beliefs. Indulgers may disrupt an observer's own goal pursuit (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996; Christakis & Fowler, 2007; Hofmann, Baumeister, Förster, & Vohs, 2012). Thus, we hypothesize observers avoid indulgers due to a belief the indulger will be a negative influence on observer’s own goals - particularly as a goal to restrain behavior is increasingly important to the observer.

Five studies across multiple domains (i.e., drinking, spending, cursing, eating) test our hypothesis. We find that observers avoid social targets who act indulgently (vs. those who exercise restraint). Further, indulgers are avoided because observers believe that such targets could negatively influence observers’ own goal-directed behaviors. Our theory is further supported by evidence of moderation by both goal importance and goal expectancy. When the goal is more important to the observer, observers believe the indulger’s influence on their own goal will be more negative, explaining amplified avoidance of indulgers. On the other hand, when observers have high goal expectancy (and therefore fewer concerns about external influences on their goals), avoidance of indulgers is attenuated. We conclude that avoidance of indulgers is a strategy used by observers to protect their valued goals.

Study 1

Observers avoid targets who drink indulgently

Design: (Target Behavior: Indulge vs. Restrain vs. Neutral) between-subj.
N = 84
DV: 8-item Avoidance index (α = .93)
Stimuli: “You and Alex strike up a conversation about your interests and hobbies. Alex is only drinking half a bottle of beer [has had quite a few drinks already and has another bottle of beer in hand],”

Observer Avoidance of Target Based on Target Behavior

Johnson-Neyman Region of Significance: Goal Importance ≥ 5.38

High Importance of Financial Goal
Believes the Target Could be Negative Influence
Target Spends Indulgently
Observer Avoids Target

Index of moderated mediation: β = -.34, SE = .11, 95% bootstrap CI: [.1474, .5843]

Avoid - Approach

Study 2

Observers avoid targets who spend indulgently, particularly when financial goals are important to the observer, due to beliefs that the target could be a negative influence on observer’s own goal-directed behavior

Design: (Target Behavior: Indulge vs. Restrain) between-subj.
N = 84
DV: 8-item Avoidance index (α = .97)
Mediator: 5-item Influence Beliefs index (α = .93)
Moderator: 5-item Goal Importance (α = .80)
Stimuli: “Alex is drinking a glass of fine [house] wine...orders one of the most [least] expensive entrees...and takes a taxi [public transportation] home.”

Observer Avoidance of Target Based on Target Behavior and Observer’s Goal Importance

Avoid - Approach

High Importance of Financial Goal
Believes the Target Could be Negative Influence
Target Spends Indulgently
Observer Avoids Target

Johnson-Neyman Region of Significance: Goal Importance ≥ 5.38

Avoid - Approach

Study 3

Observers’ avoidance of targets who indulge is attenuated when goal expectancy is high

Design: (Target Behavior: Indulge vs. Restrain) between-subj.
N = 158
DV: 8-item Avoidance index (α = .94)
Moderator: 4-item Goal Expectancy (α = .89)
Stimuli: “Alex orders one of the least [most] healthy entrees...and orders a brownie [fruit salad] for dessert.”

Observer Avoidance of Target Based on Target Behavior and Observer’s Goal Expectancy

Avoid - Approach

High Importance of Financial Goal
Believes the Target Could be Negative Influence
Target Spends Indulgently
Observer Avoids Target

Johnson-Neyman Region of Significance: Goal Expectancy ≥ 6.21

Avoid - Approach

References & Further Reading