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Response to Commentaries on Exerting Self-Control ≠ Sacrificing Pleasure

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We are grateful for the two stimulating and thought provoking commentaries by Lambertson (2020) and Mochon and Schwartz (2020). In our response, we briefly discuss the extensions of our framework suggested by Lambertson (2020), and join Mochon and Schwartz (2020) in their call for greater emphasis on construct validity.

Moral Conflicts Can — But Don't Have To — Involve Self-Control

Lamberton (2020) presents a brilliant and enriching read of our main arguments through a series of analogies with the life and work of Charles Sanders Peirce on self-control. Lambertson also presents examples of “reflective self-control conflicts” that involve choosing among ideals, social norms, and moral values rather than just consumption goals. These questions are arguably much more fascinating than the mundane consumption decisions that we have discussed in our paper, and we thank Lambertson for raising them!

Unlike Lambertson, however, we believe that our conceptualization of self-control can accommodate also these cases. Whether the superordinate goal is a consumption goal or pertains to an ideal, to a social norm, or to a moral value, it still follows that violations of superordinate goals/ideals/norms/values will trigger anticipated regret, and hence denote self-control failures.

But what about a person who anticipates to regret the “easier course of action” more so than the violation of her/his superordinate goal? For example, one may regret coming clean with a relationship-partner more than confessing a betrayal because coming clean may jeopardize the future of that relationship. Lambertson argues that in this case the violation of the subordinate goal (maintaining the relationship) rather than of the superordinate goal (being honest to one's partner) is regretted more. We agree with Lambertson that, if this

conflict involved self-control, it would constitute a counter-example for our framework. We are not sure, however, whether it does actually involve self-control.

According to our framework, a self-control conflict exists when the conflicting goals are hierarchically ordered, that is, a short-term goal is subordinate to a long-term goal. For the unfaithful partner, we would argue, it is not clear which goal is short-term and subordinate and which is long-term and superordinate. Is coming clean more important in the long-term than not jeopardizing the relationship? How can we determine which goal is the superordinate one? A simple test is to ask what a decision maker would do in the absence of self-control. Would the partner, in absence of self-control, come clean or remain silent? We have difficulties answering this question in general, which makes us believe that both goals, being honest to one's relationship partner and maintaining one's relationship in the long-term, are — generally — equally important. That is, conflict here arises from two equally important goals that involve different long-term consequences. Since neither goal is superordinate to the other, we would argue this is not a self-control conflict, even though the conflict involves anticipated regret.

Construct validity in consumer research; beyond self-control

We thank Mochon and Schwartz (2020) for their insightful overview of the importance of construct validity. We want to add to Krishna's argument (Introduction to this dialogue) relating construct validity to the replication crisis by echoing Gelman's view (Gelman, 2015, 2016): "Performing more replicable studies is not just a matter of being more careful in your data analysis (although that can't hurt) or increasing your sample size (although that, too, should only help) but also it's about putting real effort into design and

measurement. [...] When measurements are biased, noisy, and poorly controlled, statistical significance is meaningless.”

Consumer research is preoccupied with increasing the relevance of the effects we study (Inman et al., 2018). The establishment of the validity of measures or manipulations is not deemed as important, unless it is embedded in the process of defining a novel construct (e.g., Price et al., 2017; for an exception, see Graf et al., 2017). Consequently, both as authors and reviewers, we tend to uncritically accept construct operationalizations as valid, provided they have been previously used in published work. Overlooking construct validity, however, reduces statistical power, introduces confounds, limits the comparability of results across studies, and ultimately undermines the interpretability of our research findings.

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