Guilt, as a negative self-conscious emotion, can be experienced when people violate personal gistandards or social norms (Devine and Monteith 1993; Higgins 1987; Tangney 1992). Depending on whether the violation involved another person or oneself, guilt can be broadly categorized as either interpersonal (e.g., for having harmed another) or intrapersonal (e.g., for having harmed oneself). In this paper, we focus on intrapersonal guilt, as it is often experienced after self-control failure (e.g., feeling guilty after impulsive spending), and thus of great relevance to consumers (Dahl, Honea, and Manchanda 2003). In particular, we investigate how intrapersonal guilt affects people’s choice of hedonic experience in seemingly unrelated domains (e.g., watching a sad movie vs. happy movie). Empirical evidence on interpersonal guilt shows that guilt may lead to a greater tendency to forgo pleasure and even to seek pain (Bastian, Jetten, and Fasoli 2011; Inbar et al. 2013; Nelissen and Zeelenberg 2009; Wallington 1973). These findings have been explained as a means of feeling better: People use one kind of negative experience (e.g., physical pain) to get rid of another (e.g., psychological pain). This explanation is counterintuitive, since, as the well-documented literature on mood repair would suggest, the person could have sought pleasure rather than another painful experience to reduce the feelings of guilt. In addition, it is not empirically clear whether the same behavioral tendency (seeking pain and avoiding pleasure) would apply in the context of intrapersonal guilt.

We investigate the effect of guilt on hedonic experience-seeking from a goal-regulation perspective. We argue that guilt would call for action to ensure goal-consistent behavior in the future. In other words, guilt involves the sense of being self-accountable for the negative behavior, and would prompt acting to ensure that one would behave goal-consistently in the future. Negative experience (either by forgoing pleasure or voluntarily seeking pain), we argue, would be sought as a self-correcting measure to prevent future goal-inconsistent behavior.

We conducted five experiments to test our proposition that voluntarily seeking negative experience is driven by the goal people failed to attain due to their own fault. Specifically, we show that, compared to negative but non-guilt emotions, guilt is more likely to lead people to seek negative experience in the following situations: (1) when they believe that enduring negative experience is instrumental for achieving goals (experiments 1A and 1B), (2) when they want to persist with a failed goal (experiment 2), or (3) when they believe their personal qualities are changeable—and therefore potentially correctable—over time (experiments 3 and 4). All the experiments, taken together, support a goal-regulation explanation of why people seek negative experience when they feel guilty.

Our study contributes to the literature on self-conscious emotions by testing the goal-regulation mechanism that underlies the seemingly irrational behavior of seeking negative experience in response to guilt. It also adds to the growing body of work documenting the goal-regulation role of counter-hedonistic behavior (Martin 2000).