ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

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So Near and Yet So Far: the Mental Representation of Goal Progress

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We propose that the mental representation of progress level serves as a self-regulatory mechanism to ensure goal attainment. When individuals just start the pursuit, they exaggerate their progress level to signal higher goal attainability and elicit greater effort. In contrast, when people are approaching the end point, they downplay their progress to create greater perceived discrepancy, and thus elicit greater effort.

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Getting There: The Perception of Goal Progress and its Effects on Goal Pursuit

Chair: Elaine Chan, Tilburg University, The Netherlands

Paper #1: So Near and Yet So Far: The Mental Representation of Goal Progress

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Paper #2: Goal Monitoring: Does One Step Forward Seem Larger Than One Step Back?

Margaret C. Campbell, University of Colorado, USA
Caleb Warren, Bocconi University, Italy

Paper #3: The Dual Effects of Optimism on Post-Purchase Goal Pursuit

Elaine Chan, Tilburg University, The Netherlands
Anirban Mukhopadhyay, HKUST, Hong Kong
Jaideep Sengupta, HKUST, Hong Kong

Paper #4: Pleasure, Pain, and Focus on Initial vs. End States as Determinants of Motivation in Goal Pursuit

Juliano Laran, University of Miami, USA
Keith Wilcox, Babson College, USA

SESSION OVERVIEW

Session Objective: The extant goals literature converges on the idea that making goal progress influences subsequent goal-pursuit actions. However, there is relatively little research devoted to understanding the antecedents that drive perceptions of goal progress. The purpose of this special session is to present current research that examines such antecedents from a variety of perspectives, and also illuminates the mechanisms by which perceptions of progress drive subsequent goal-directed behavior. In doing so, this session hopes to spark interest in a new direction for research on goals and goal-related action.

Overview: Much work in the goals arena has suggested that the perception of making goal progress has an effect on subsequent goal-directed behavior. Thus, taking a step towards goal fulfillment has been found to produce subsequent behavior that is either consistent with the goal or is disengaged from it, depending on contextual factors (Fishbach and Dhar 2005). There is, however, relatively scant research that takes a step back to examine what actually determines individuals' perceptions of progress. The papers in this session offer new insights into the goals literature by proposing a range of perspectives regarding this issue (including both situational and personality-related factors); at the same time, the papers also extend work on how and when progress perceptions influence subsequent behavior.

Papers: In the first paper, Huang, Zhang and Broniarczyk demonstrate that the interpretation of progress is contingent on whether individuals are at the initial or the advanced stage of goal pursuit. Across four studies, they show that at the initial stage of goal pursuit, individuals exaggerate their progress level, which in turn motivates them to strive for the goal. On the other hand, individuals downplay their progress level when nearing goal attainment. This discrepancy then induces greater effort in the goal pursuit. In the second paper, Campbell and Warren propose that individuals infer different perceptions of goal progress from an initial behavior, depending on whether the behavior is framed as goal-consistent or inconsistent. Among other findings, they show that even for behavior that has objectively the same magnitude (e.g., saving vs. spending $30), consumers overweigh the positive influence of goal-consistent behavior versus the negative influence of goal-inconsistent behavior when assessing progress; in turn, this has a negative impact on goal attainment. In the third paper, Chan, Mukhopadhyay and Sengupta examine the interactive influence of optimism and mental simulation (focusing on outcome vs. process) on perceptions of goal pursuit, and its consequences on subsequent behavior. They examine this question in the context of anticipatory purchasing – defined as the purchase of products that the buyers are unable to use at the time of purchase, but would like to in the future (e.g., clothes that are currently a size too tight). Across five studies, they show that for optimists, deciding to make an anticipatory purchase heightens goal commitment under an outcome-focus, while inducing perceptions of goal progress under a process-focus: subsequent behavior is goal-consistent in the former case and goal-inconsistent in the latter. On the other hand, for pessimists, the anticipatory purchase decision actually leads to a reduction in commitment under outcome-focus (leading to goal-inconsistent later behavior), while it does not change perceptions of goal progress or commitment under a process focus. Finally, Laran examines the moderating influence of goal valence on the relationship between progress perceptions and subsequent behavior. Given an "approach pleasure" goal, a perceived lack of progress motivates goal-directed behavior when individuals focus on the end state (vs. the initial state). However, given an "avoid pain" goal, the pattern is reversed: lack of progress motivates behavior when individuals focus on initial state (vs. the end state).

Contribution: The topic of goal pursuit is both important and relevant to consumer research. Each of the four papers in this session presents novel and interesting results. Together these provide new examination of the antecedents of goal progress, as well as enhancing our understanding of consequences for goal-directed behavior. All four papers include multiple completed studies; none of the four has been presented at ACR previously. Elaine Chan (Tilburg University) will serve as the session chair. All speakers have agreed to serve and present their respective papers if this special session is accepted.

Likely audience: We believe that this session addresses an important yet under-researched aspect of goals research, and has the potential to be well attended by researchers interested in motivation, goals, and self-control. We hope that a discussion of this emerging area will spark lively and productive debate.

So Near and Yet So Far: The Mental Representation of Goal Progress

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In the course of goal pursuit, people actively monitor their levels of progress on goal attainment, and these assessments have a profound influence on their subsequent motivation (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Louro, Pieters, & Zeelenberg, 2007). However, what determines people's assessment of their progress? Is it always the case that people try to form accurate mental representations of their progress level on a goal? In the present research, we explore the possibility that the mental representation of progress level, rather than being a faithful reflection of one's actual level of progress, can function as a self-regulatory mechanism that helps ensure the attainment of important goals.

We adopt the dynamics of self-regulation (Fishbach, Dhar, & Zhang, 2006; Koo & Fishbach, 2008) as the theoretical framework, and propose a self-regulatory analysis of people's mental representation of goal progress. We propose that when individuals have just

started pursuing a goal and have accumulated limited progress, they are primarily concerned about the attainability of the goal. Therefore, they are likely to exaggerate their progress level in their mental representation to signal a higher chance of eventual goal attainment, which helps to elicit greater motivation. However, when people have made substantial progress and are approaching the end point of the pursuit, the attainment of the goal is relatively secured and they are more concerned about reducing the remaining discrepancy. At this stage, individuals are likely to downplay their progress to create greater perceived discrepancy between their current and the ideal state, which in turn helps elicit greater effort in the pursuit.

We further propose that, because this alteration of mental representation is an instrumental mechanism to boost effort and to ensure successful goal attainment, it should occur only when efforts are necessary and effective in helping to secure the attainment of important goals. In other situations, such as when the goal is unimportant or when efforts are ineffective in helping goal attainment, such changes in mental representations should not occur.

Four studies were conducted to test present predictions. Participants in Study 1 completed a color recognition task and were offered either a low- or a high-value reward for successful completion. We manipulated their perceived stage in the pursuit by convincing participants that they either had just started the task, or were approaching the end point. We found that when participants just started the task, those aiming for high- (vs. low-) value reward exaggerated their progress in the task; conversely, when participants were approaching the end point, those aiming for high- (vs. low-) value reward downplayed their progress. Such alternation of mental representation of progress led to greater subsequent motivation in the pursuit, which was measured by greater amount of time participants spent in memorizing colors to complete the task for the reward.

In Study 2, participants completed a word identification task and were offered a limited-edition school-symbol magnet as a reward for reaching 21,500 points by the end of the task; we measured participants' willingness-to-pay for the reward as a proxy for their perceived goal value. We also manipulated their perceived stage in the pursuit by providing feedback on their current points; after answering 15 word-identification questions, participants in the initial-stage conditions received 3,157 points, whereas those in the advanced-stage conditions received 11,813 points. We measured participants' mental representation of progress and their subsequent motivation in earning more points for the reward, and found consistent patterns as in Study 1.

In Study 3, participants worked on a pitch differentiation task and were offered $20 bonus reward for reaching 23,900 points in the task. We informed participants either that pitch identification is an innate ability and cannot be improved through practice, or that it can be improved through effort. We also manipulated their perceived stage in the pursuit by providing feedback on their accumulated points (7,966 points in initial-stage conditions vs. 15,932 points in advanced-stage conditions). We found that participants only altered their mental representation of progress level when they believed that they could improve their pitch identification skills through practice, and such alteration of mental representation of progress again led to greater subsequent effort in the task.

In Study 4, we tested the hypothesis in a field study with a t-shirt donation campaign. Students were invited to donate their used t-shirts to a charitable cause, and we manipulated the importance of the goal by changing the cause for the campaign. In addition, we manipulated the stage in the pursuit by showing participants different visual stimuli: people were shown a picture of either two (initial stage) or 10 (advanced stage) full boxes of used t-shirts, presumably the donations we have taken so far for the campaign. We measured participants' mental representations of progress by asking them to estimate the number of t-shirts in these boxes, and we recorded the number of t-shirts they donated as the indicator of their motivation to help attain this collective goal. We found that when the cause of donation was highly important (vs. less important), people exaggerated the number of used t-shirts in the picture to signal higher goal attainability when there were only two full boxes, but downplayed the number of used t-shirts when they saw 10 boxes of t-shirts. This alternation of mental representation again led to greater motivation, i.e., more t-shirts people donated to help ensure the attainment of the goal they deemed more important.

Goal Monitoring: Does One Step Forward Seem Larger Than One Step Back?

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers often pursue continuing goals, like saving for retirement or maintaining a healthy weight, where attainment depends on a number of behaviors and decisions made over time. Although the literature suggests that accurately monitoring progress towards such goals is essential for goal attainment (Baumeister and Heatherton 1996; Carver and Scheier 1982), surprisingly little research investigates whether consumers are typically accurate in monitoring goal progress. Accurate monitoring requires that consumers perceive the impact of their behaviors on goal progress in an unbiased manner. At a minimum, accuracy requires that the influence of a behavior be perceived similarly irrespective of whether that behavior moves the consumer closer to or further from goal attainment. For example, a consumer with a savings goal should perceive a $30 departure from a budget as carrying the same psychological weight regardless of whether it represents extra savings or extra spending.

The focal question of our research is whether consumers accurately weight the influence of goal-consistent behaviors, like saving $30 or resisting a scoop of ice cream, relative to goal-inconsistent behaviors, like spending $30 or eating a scoop of ice cream, on perceived goal progress. Research suggests that consumers' perceptions of progress could be biased in either direction (Baumeister et al. 2001; Ahluwalia 2002). However, because (1) consumers selectively distort information in order to maintain a positive impression of themselves (Dunning 1999, 2007; Taylor and Brown 1988), and (2) goal-consistent behaviors reflect positively on one's self whereas goal-inconsistent behavior threaten one's self-view (Prelec and Bodner 2003), we hypothesize that consumers overweight the influence of goal-consistent relative to goal-inconsistent behaviors when assessing their progress.

Our first study asked members of an online survey panel to think of a personal goal, one behavior that moved them closer to the goal, and one behavior that moved them further from the goal. Consistent with our hypothesis, respondents were more likely to recall a goal-consistent behavior than a goal-consistent behavior (89% vs. 64%); furthermore, respondents who listed both behaviors rated the goal-consistent behavior as having a larger impact than the goal-inconsistent behavior (M = 6.7 vs. 4.8; scale from 1-9).

Studies 2 and 3 used hypothetical scenarios to explicitly control for the magnitude of the goal-consistent and goal-inconsistent behaviors that participants evaluated. In study 2, undergraduate participants rated running one more mile as having a larger influence than running one less mile on progress towards an exercise goal (M = 2.3 vs. 1.4; scale from 0-4). Similarly, in study 3, undergraduate participants believed that saving an additional $30 helped their progress