A Construal Level Theory Approach to Understanding Self-Control Strategies

Kelly Haws, University of South Carolina

Many prevalent societal issues arise from the overconsumption of resources often associated with self-control failure. The present research seeks to enlighten various strategies that consumers use to exercise control over their own behavior by organizing these strategies using construal level theory (CLT) principles of psychological distance. Evidence of consumers’ actual self-control strategies is presented with respect to the CLT framework. Individual differences in trait self-control are shown to affect the use of self-control strategies. A number of interesting future research avenues arise from the CLT framework and data.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12535/volumes/v34/NA-34

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*Kelly Haws, University of South Carolina*

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Failures to exercise self-control over one’s behavior contribute to a variety of maladies that affect modern society. Virtually constant media attention, on such issues as increased health care problems due to obesity, rising bankruptcies caused by overextension of credit, lack of savings by Americans, and a variety of addictions to both legal and illegal substances, suggests a common link to under-regulated behavior. As such, understanding strategies that can be used to increase consumer self-control is crucial. Many strategies have been discussed in the marketing and psychology literature, but a thorough integration of the different strategies is lacking. In extant research, Hoch and Loewenstein (1991) distinguish between desire reducing and willpower enhancing strategies. Similarly, Dholakia et al. (2006) categorize self-control strategies either as “approaching the desire-resistance goal” or “avoiding the temptation”.

The present research seeks to enlighten various strategies that consumers use to exercise control over their own behavior by organizing these strategies using construal level theory (CLT) principles of psychological distance (Trope and Liberman 2003). Recent research by Fujita et al. (2005) discussed the integration of CLT and self-control in order to better understand consumer decisions. The basic proposition is that consumers’ high-level construals are more highly correlated with their actual values and attitudes than are their low-level construals.

Although the primary focus of their CLT research is temporal construal, Trope and Liberman (2003) suggest that the same principles apply to other dimensions involving psychological distance, and therefore propose level of construal as a basis for a unified theory. The specific construal level mechanisms are known as the four W’s of CLT: 1) When (temporal distance), 2) Where (spatial distance), 3) Who (social distance), and 4) Whether (hypotheticality or probabilistic distance). Across the various construal level mechanisms, a concerted focus on higher-level construals enhances the likelihood that an individual will successfully exercise self-control. The present research uses the four construal level mechanisms to organize and understand specific a total of 30 distinct consumer self-control strategies.

**Construal Level Self-Control Strategies**

Many temporally-based self-control strategies are likely to be fairly common for consumers. Because two of the three primary components of self-control (i.e., both standards and the monitoring of progress) (Baumeister 2002) are represented in the temporal distance category, this set of strategies is foundational to overcoming potential consumer self-control failures. Spatial strategies primarily involve contextual changes to one’s environment, such as avoidance or removal. Social distancing strategies use distance between oneself and others, as well as one’s actual and ideal selves. Probabilistic strategies cover a broad spectrum of approaches to regulating self-control through careful assessment of one’s potential actions and the impact of these actions on the likelihood of accomplishing higher-level goals.

The present research specifies strategies as representing one or more CLT mechanism. Many interesting issues arise from this organization of self-control strategies. It is simply not possible for all of the various strategies to be equally effective or for the same strategies to be equally effective for all individuals. Identifying the circumstances and individual difference variables that most impact self-control represents an important next step in understanding the effective use of self-control strategies.

**Factors Affecting Self-Control Strategy Use**

The first individual difference factor for examining the differential effectiveness of self-control strategies is one’s inherent level of self-control. Generally, consumers with high levels of trait self-control will be more likely to successfully use self-control strategies than those with low levels of self-control. Identifying which strategies or category of strategies work most effectively for those with low levels of self-control would be an important contribution. Individuals with low self-control are likely to try fewer strategies in their efforts to self-regulate. Self-efficacy suggests that past failures in exercising self-control will be taken into account in dealing with current temptations (Bandura 1977). Similarly, those with high levels of self-control simply need fewer strategies to obtain the desired results because they are confident in the success of a few core strategies based on past experiences. However, consumers with moderate levels of self-control are more likely to draw from a larger assortment of strategies when attempting self-regulation because of the greater ambiguity associated with their own ability to exercise self-control.

**Method.** Two studies involving various individual difference measures and open-ended response data regarding use of self-control strategies were conducted to enlighten the use of such strategies by consumers. Study 1 used a student sample (n=80), while study 2 consisted of adult consumers (n=157). Select study 1 results are reported below. The data collected in the two studies provide a rich data source that can be analyzed in a variety of ways useful to understanding consumers’ use of self-control strategies.

**Results.** A total of 238 self-control strategies (i.e., an average of 3.0 per participant) emerged from the open-ended responses obtained in study 1. Two coders independently coded responses into predetermined categories, based on extant literature and the CLT framework.
Temporal strategies were the most common (127), followed by probabilistic (85), spatial (21), and social/self (3). These results indicate that temporal and probabilistic strategies are the most commonly used strategies. Specifically, budgeting was by far the most common self-control strategy used by consumers.

The data collected in study 1 also allowed for a test regarding the number of self-control strategies used by individuals differing in their level of self-control. Responses to Tangney et al.’s (2004) 13-item self-control measure were averaged to form an index (r=0.83). The sample was then split three ways to represent low, medium, and high self-control groups. A one-way ANOVA revealed the predicted curvilinear relationship among the three groups, with the greatest number of different strategies being used by those in the moderate self-control group ($M_{\text{Low SC}}=2.77$, $M_{\text{Medium SC}}=3.44$, $M_{\text{High SC}}=2.69$, $F=2.82$, $p=.066$).

Summary
Although previous research has investigated the ability of various self-control theories to explain a variety of consumer behaviors, only limited research has focused on understanding the strategies used to combat self-control failure. The present CLT based approach for organizing and understanding self-control strategies serves to enlighten previous research on self-control and provides a foundation for future related work. Increasing understanding of how, when, and why particular self-control strategies are used provides an important avenue for enlightening the problems associated with self-control failure.

References

Collins’s Interaction Ritual Theory: Using Interaction Rituals to Conceptualize How Objects Become Sacred Symbols

Kyle A. Huggins, University of Arkansas - Fayetteville, USA
Jeff B. Murray, University of Arkansas - Fayetteville, USA
Jeremy Kees, University of Arkansas - Fayetteville, USA
Elizabeth H. Creyer, University of Arkansas - Fayetteville, USA

Abstract
Numerous marketing articles have been published on special possessions emphasizing the roles that objects play in constructing identity or self. While these articles emphasize the importance of special possessions, there has been a dearth of theory and understanding as to how these objects are commissioned as “special” by the consumer. Currently unbeknownst to marketers, Collins’s Interaction Ritual Theory provides a new conceptual tool by which marketers can investigate this consumer selection process. By examining consumer’s interaction rituals, marketers can gain a better understanding of the process by which objects become sacred, that is to say how material objects become special possessions symbolically representing previous positive interactions.

Summary
It was not until the late 1970s that sociologists like Heise (1979), Hochschild (1979), Kemper (1978), and Shott (1979) undertook the systematic study of emotions. In retrospect, this late date is remarkable in spite of the fact that emotions permeate virtually every aspect of human experience. How could a majority of sociologists have turned a blind eye to emotions all this time? Not all of them did, but with relatively few exceptions, sociologists had studied just about every aspect of human behavior and somehow given comparatively little attention to the dynamics of emotion (Turner & Stets 2005). Historically, it seems that Western thought has juxtaposed emotion or affect and cognition. Cognition is often associated with rational thinking, such as information processing models. However, research on the neurology of emotions now demonstrates that this is simply incorrect. Data clearly indicate that when areas of the cerebral cortex, particularly the prefrontal lobe, are disconnected from sub cortical emotion centers of the brain, individuals have difficulty making decisions of any kind and almost always make what appear to be irrational or at least suboptimal decisions (Damasio 1994, 2003). Thus, human rationality and, more generally, decision making are dependent on emotions, and without them, individuals cannot attach valences or utilities (Turner & Stets 2005).

Therefore, emotions make individual decisions, social structures, and systems of cultural symbols viable. Conversely, emotions are also what can drive people apart and push them to tear down social structures and challenge cultural traditions (i.e. Berlin wall). Thus, experience, behavior, interaction, and organization are connected to the mobilization and expression of emotions and greatly need to be
more understood at the individual level of consumption. Randall Collins (2004) argues that emotions are the common denominator of rationality because rationality depends on assessing the utility (or capacity to bestow positive affect) of alternative lines of conduct. Hence, in general, sociological theories of emotion assume that people pursue lines of conduct that bring about positive emotional outcomes and try at all costs to avoid experiences that lead to negative emotional consequences. Using this assumption of emotional behavior, it is the purpose of this paper to bring to light Collins’s Interaction Ritual Theory and its possible impact on marketing literature in understanding how emotions transform symbols (objects) into sacred artifacts for groups and individuals.

Collins explains that the interaction ritual is an emotional transformer, turning some transient emotions (e.g. joy, happiness, fear) into other enduring emotions (privilege, power, status acceptance or rejection) as outcomes representing emotional energy that is carried across situations. Collins gives us a model by which this emotional transformation process occurs. For a ritualistic situation to produce emotional energy, there are some necessary ingredients required of the situation. First, there must be a co-presence of bodies or a group assembly (more than one). According to Collins, an interaction ritual cannot occur by one’s self. Next, barriers to outsiders must be established. These can be physical barriers like house walls or a group of girls standing in a tight circle, or these barriers can be psychological. Either way, a person commonly knows whether they are on the inside or outside of the interaction circle. Thirdly, there must be mutual focus of attention by all persons in the ritual. People focus their attention upon a common object or activity, and by communicating this focus to each other become mutually aware of each other’s focus of attention. Finally, there must be shared common mood or emotional experience among the individuals. Ingredients three and four become a feedback loop that intensifies through rhythmic entrainment, meaning that as the persons become more tightly focused on their common activity, more aware of what each other is doing and feeling, and more aware of each other’s awareness, they experience their shared emotion more intensely, as it comes to dominate their awareness.

This feedback intensification then produces collective effervescence, or what Durkheim called collective consciousness, which is the collective situation engrossment or participation in the moment that results in shared common excitement. This process then produces very specific ritualistic outcomes that become important only to the group who experienced the collective effervescence. The first outcome is group solidarity or group identity, which is a feeling of membership to each person. Secondly, each member receives emotional energy, or a feeling of confidence, elation, strength, enthusiasm, and initiative in taking action, which is able to be transferred beyond just this interaction ritual. Thirdly, emblems or other representations (object, visual icons, words, gestures even) become sacred symbols of social relationship. These artifacts are representative of the group interaction and only the interaction. These objects are not sacred to those who did not experience the interaction ritual, but only to the participants. And finally, the group develops standards of morality or the sense of rightness in adhering to group norms, especially concerning the sacred symbols. Participants respect these symbols and will even defend them against group transgressors or outsider’s violations of the symbols. Therefore, it is clear to see how Collins’s IR Theory describes the process by which symbols or objects become sacred to a group or individual, and how these objects become symbolic representations of positive emotional rituals.

Within a marketing context, numerous articles have been published on special possessions and the roles that these objects play in constructing identity or a sense of self (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981; Belk 1988; Curasi, Price, & Arnould 2004; Ahuvia 2004). While these articles emphasize the importance of special possessions, there has been a dearth of theory and understanding as to how these objects are commissioned as “special” by the consumer. Currently unbeknownst to marketers, Collins’s Interaction Ritual Theory provides a new innovative conceptual tool by which marketers can investigate this arena of the consumer selection process. By examining consumer’s interaction rituals, marketers will be able to gain a better understanding of the process by which objects become sacred, that is to say how material objects become special possessions symbolically representing previous positive interactions.

References