Special Session Summary  the Application of Goal Systems Theory to Consumer Behavior
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SESSION OVERVIEW

Goals are becoming an increasingly important concept in consumer behavior. Goals have been found to influence what information we attend to (Huffman and Huston 1993), what attribute we use to make a decision (Garbarino and Johnson 1993) and what product category is considered (Ratneswar et al. 2001). Previous research on goals, however, has tended to treat and manipulate goals on an individual basis, instead of considering them as a system of goals and the means for achieving the goal. Recently, such a system has been proposed by Kruglanski and colleagues (2002). Within this system, goals are viewed as cognitive structures and are associated so the activation of one goal may either activate or inhibit another goal. In addition, the means for achieving each goal are associated with the goal. Consequently, the activation of a goal also activates the means for achieving the goal. This theory provides a rich framework for examining effect of goals on consumer behavior.

The purpose of this session is to introduce the Theory of Goal Systems to consumer behavior researchers and demonstrate its value in examining important consumer behavior issues. In the first paper, Kruglanski and colleagues present the theory. The principles of multifinality and equifinality are illustrated as well as the transfer of affect from goal achievement to the means. Research conducted within the goal systemic framework has found, among others, that (1) goals may pull attentional resources from one another, (2) individuals shield their goal commitment by inhibiting competing goals, and (3) means can activate their associated goals in a bottom up fashion. The implications of this framework for consumer psychology are discussed.

In the second paper, Fishbach uses the theory to understand successful self-control mechanisms. The results of a series of studies indicate that successful self-control occurs when momentary goals (i.e. temptations) activate overriding goals (e.g. when chocolate cake activates the goal of dieting). This activation pattern is asymmetrical: whereas temptations bring to mind the opposing goals, goals inhibit interfering temptations.

In the third paper, Zhang and Mitchell, discuss their current research which applies and extends aspects of the theory to consumer behavior. More specifically, they examine whether brands are associated with consumer goals as the attainment means. The results of two studies find that the priming of both high-level and low-level goals automatically activate brands which are used to achieve those goals. Moreover, the affect felt with respect to the achievement of a consumer goal is transferred to the associated brands. By linking brands to the consumer goal system, a new perspective on brand choice and consumer brand relationship is provided.

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The present paper introduces the theory of goal systems and discusses its implication for motivational phenomena and consumer psychology. The theory of goals systems adopts a cognitive approach to motivation that treats goal-concepts as knowledge-structures governed by general cognitive principles. In addition, goal-concepts possess distinctly motivational contents that determine their manner of functioning. From that perspective, (1) goal systems constitute stored mental representations capable of being learned, altered or activated; (2) self-regulatory phenomena are jointly governed by cognitive principles that goal systems share in common with other cognitive systems, and motivational principles derived from the uniquely motivational contents of goal-systemic elements.

Major cognitive properties of goal systems derive from their interconnected nature. Interconnections have two essential aspects, namely: (1) strength of the links between goal-systemic elements, and (2) their form, that is, configurations these links create. Because goal systemic elements are motivational in content (constituting “goals” and “means”) they possess several motivational properties as well: (1) Jointly, goal value and expectancy of attainment determine a goal’s subjective utility driving goal-commitment. (2) Sustained motivation contributes to persistence at an activity and to the quality of its performance. Goal activation contributes to the sustenance of motivation and hence it should contribute to persistence and performance. (3) Goal attainment and nonattainment are typically accompanied by positive and negative affect respectively, which specific quality varies with the type of goal (e.g. of promotion or prevention); (4) Individuals’ choices strive to maximize total outcomes, that is, to satisfy a maximal number of goals with a minimal expenditure of resources.

Prior research within the goal systemic framework has shown that goals are cognitively activated by their correspondent means and means are cognitively activated by their correspondent goals. We found that such activation patterns: (1) arise in course of an active pursuit of goals via particular means, hence cannot be fully explained by mere semantic associations between goal and means terms in the general language, (2) have unique consequences for goal commitment, task performance and activity experience. We found that the strength with which a goal activates a means contributes to goal commitment by enhancing the expectancy of goal attainment. Furthermore, the degree to which a means cognitively activates a goal enhances task persistence and performance by focusing the actor’s attention on the goal at hand. We also found evidence for “emotional transfer” between goals and means whereby the specific affect typically attendant upon goal attainment (or nonattainment) imbues the way activities leading to that goal (i.e., the means) are experienced.

In addition to looking at relations between goals and means, goal systemic research also has examined the relations between goals and other, incompatible goals. We found that goals may pull attentional resources away from one another, and in order to shield highly committed goals from such a pull individuals may inhibit competing goal alternatives. To maintain effective self regulation some individuals may also learn to (1) activate high order goals upon encountering “temptation” goals that threaten to undermine progress to the former, high order, objectives, and (2) inhibit low order “temptation goals” (e.g. tasty but fattening foods) upon activation of a high order objectives (e.g. dieting).
Goal systemic research also addressed the form of goal-systemic interconnections, in addition to looking at their strength and function (facilitative, inhibitory). Specifically, the number of means to a given goal may vary as may the number of goals served by a given means. The set of means linked to a given goal defines the configuration of equifinality. The set of goals linked to a single means define the configuration of multifinality. Equifinality poses the problem of choice between the means, assumed to be often resolved via the multifinality principle, i.e. the choice of means that the “focal” goal satisfies, often outside of conscious awareness in addition to other, “background”, goals. We found evidence for the operation of the multifinality principle in unconscious choice phenomena involving selection among different products. We also found that the pursuit of multifinality is greater for individuals under high need for cognitive closure (Kruglanski, 1989; with Webster, 1996; in press). The pursuit of multifinality by high need for closure individuals has been demonstrated in a variety of product domains as well as in the tendency to prefer “multifinal” over “unifinal” friends.

An important phenomenon related to the notion of equifinality is that of substitutability of one means for another in the case of failure or thwarting of progress to the goal via a given means. In accordance with the goal systemic analysis we find that substitutability is a matter of cognitive framing. Thus, the same two activities may be treated as mutually substitutable in one context, where their common goal is activated, and as nonsubstitutable in another context wherein their noncommon goals are activated. Furthermore, different individuals may vary in their general tendency to view the means-goal structure as equifinal. For example, individuals with a promotion focus (Higgins, 1997) tend to view means as more substitutable than individuals with a prevention focus who tend to view means as necessary (rather than as sufficient) to goal attainment. One implication of this is that individuals with a promotion focus may mistake promises for goal attainments, and hence be less likely to act after making a promise than the case would be in the absence of a promise. Evidence for these notions will be discussed, and the implications for consumer issues will be drawn.

“Temptations Elicit Overriding Goal Activations”
Ayelet Fishbach, University of Chicago

A delicious chocolate cake in the storefront of a bakery may remind individuals of the unfortunate fact that they should go on a diet. A thought of an exotic place, ideal for a relaxing vacation, may conjure up approaching deadlines at work. On these and similar occasions, elaborating upon a seemingly desirable course of action may bring to mind the opposing, higher priority objective. The present research explored the nature of automatic associations formed between short-term motives (temptations) and the overriding goals with which they interfere. Five experimental studies, encompassing several self-regulatory domains, found that temptations tend to activate such higher priority goals, whereas the latter tend to inhibit the temptations. These activation patterns occurred outside of participants’ conscious awareness and did not appear to tax their mental resources. Moreover, they varied as function of subjective goal importance and were more pronounced for successful versus unsuccessful self-regulators in a given domain. Finally, priming by temptation stimuli was found to influence not only the activation of overriding goals, but to also affect goal-congruent behavioral choices.

More specifically, Study 1 assessed the strength of temptation-goal associations through the use of a subliminal sequential priming procedure. Using participants’ self-generated goal-temptation pairs (e.g. “study-basketball”, “faithful-sex”), we assessed the time for recognizing goals preceded by subliminal temptations and the time for recognizing temptations preceded by subliminal goals. We then found that when the target was a goal, participants were faster to recognize it after having been primed with a temptation rather than a neutral prime. However, when the target was a temptation, participants were slower to recognize it after having been primed with the goal rather than a neutral prime.

The second study was designed to further test for the automaticity of temptation-elicited goal activation by replicating this effect under cognitive load. Once again, goal-temptation associations were assessed through a subliminal sequential priming procedure. We measured time for recognizing religious goals (e.g., “prayer” and “bible”) following subliminal “sinful” temptation primes (e.g., “drugs” or “sex”), and time for recognizing “sinful” temptations following subliminal religious goal primes. Half of the participants performed the task under cognitive load. In line with our prediction, the same pattern emerged in the presence and in the absence of cognitive load: Participants were faster to recognize the goal following a temptation prime than following a neutral prime. However, they were slower to recognize the temptation after a goal prime than after a neutral prime.

Assuming that goal activation by temptation indeed represents a functional means of self-control, it should be associated with successful, rather than unsuccessful, goal attainment. Accordingly, with respect to the academic goal of excelling at one’s coursework, Study 3 found that only successful students activate academic goals in the presence of cues for procrastination. This pattern was not manifested among less successful students who are presumably less efficient at shielding themselves against procrastination cues.

In addition to self-regulatory success, goal activation by temptations further depends on the subjective value of the goal. That is, goal activation should occur only with regard to highly valued goals. Accordingly, in Study 4 we tested for the combined influence of variations in subjective goal value and success in goal pursuit on temptation-elicited goal activation. Specifically, with respect to the goal of weight-watching, we expected that activation of goals by temptations would be more pronounced for successful versus unsuccessful weight watchers only to the extent that they perceived weight watching to be a particularly important personal objective. In line with our predictions, increased accessibility of dieting-related concepts following food primes was found only with regards to successful dieters who expressed concerns with watching their weight.

Our last study was designed to test for the behavioral consequences of goal priming. It was hypothesized that when fattening food is served, restricted eaters should activate the goal of dieting, which in turn should enable them to avoid the “forbidden” culinary delights. Due to the activation of self-control processes, temptation cues are also expected to prevent succumbing to temptations as much or more than direct goal-related cues. Accordingly, participants, all concerned about their weight, were exposed to either diet primes, fattening food primes, or control primes. Next, we assessed (1) activation of “diet” in a lexical decision task, (2) intentions to consume fattening food, and (3) choice of a gift: healthy apple vs. fattening Twix bar. In line with our predictions, participants in the food-prime condition were just as quick to recognize the word “diet” as individuals in the diet-prime condition and both conditions were faster than the control-prime. In addition, activating the goal made participants more conscious about their weight, consequently leading to more goal-congruent behavioral choices (i.e., of apple versus Twix-bar) in the food-prime and diet-prime conditions compared with the control condition. Finally, only participants in the food-prime condition showed diminished intentions to consume fattening food. Apparently, only fattening food primes bol-
tered self-control attempts as such, motivating the formation of intentions to overcome specific temptations in the future.

In sum, this research identifies facilitative links between temptation stimuli and the higher priority goals they threaten to undermine. These findings suggest that to the extent that they represent low priority temptations, external cues may set in motion self-control mechanisms designed to counteract their own influence, thus wresting behavioral control from the ‘unconcerned’ environment and relegating it to one’s own, “internal” priorities.

“Brands as Means in Consumer Goal Systems”
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The theory of goal systems is applied to consumer behavior by examining whether brands are associated with both high-level (abstract and value-embedded) and low-level (specific and action-oriented) consumer goals as goal attainment means. Two experiments were conducted. The first used sequential priming in a lexical decision task and found that the priming of a goal automatically activates its associated brands. The second study investigated a unique feature of a consumer goal system, which is, the affect felt whose goal has been attained is transferred to the associated brands.

Study 1:
Participants were first asked to list two high-level goals (or two low-level goals) that came to mind. The typical high-level goals they listed included “be a successful businessman” and “be intelligent” etc., whereas the typical low-level goals they listed included “cooling off” and “planning a vacation” etc. They were then asked to list two brands that could help them attain each of these goals. For example, brands listed for the above-mentioned goals included: “Holt Renfrew” and “IBM”; “Nestle Ice Cream” and “Air Canada”. The participants then completed a 20-minute filler task to eliminate the temporarily enhanced accessibility of goals and brands. They were then subliminally primed with either a goal or a control word (e.g. tree) and asked to judge whether a target letter string was a word or not. The target letter strings included brands they listed, unrelated brands, control words (e.g. house, plant) and an equal number of nonwords. After completing this task, participants were asked to think of each brand as if it was a person, and rated how similar the person was to them as well as how they aspired to be like that person. The purpose of this question was to better understand the personalities of brands activated by each goal.

The results were as expected. Participants were significantly faster to respond to a brand after being primed with the goal associated with it. This indicated that brands were closely linked to goals and the presentation of a goal could automatically activate brands which were means to attain it.

Study 1 also demonstrated a difference between the personalities of brands associated with high-level goals vs. low-level goals. Consistent with findings of the branding literature that consumers are more likely to consider brands with a personality compatible with their own (i.e. current self, working self) or they aspire to be like (i.e. desired self) (e.g. Marcus 1986), participants were more likely to rate the brand as similar to them, or as whom they would like to become when brands were associated with a high-level goal. However, when a low-level goal was activated, participants neither regarded the brand as similar to self nor would they aspire to be like it. The brand was simply a means to achieve a temporarily activated goal. This result echoed Aaker’s (1999) distinction between “self-congruity” and “situation-congruity” on brand attitudes, however, by linking brands to goals, we are able to move a step further by demonstrating when “self-congruity” and “situation-congruity” attitudes occur. When a high-level goal is activated, consumers will prefer a brand with a personality compatible with the self, whereas when a low-level goal is activated, consumers may not care much about whether the brand is compatible with self or not, instead, they proffer brands with characteristics compatible with the requirement of the temporary situation.

Study 2:
Study 1 demonstrated that goals could activate brands. Study 2, however, went a step further to demonstrate a unique feature of a consumer goal system, that is, the affect experienced by consumers when they attain a goal is transferred to associated brands. This transfer of affect is in proportion to the association strength between the goal and the brands.

Participants were asked to list two high-level goals (or low-level goals) that came to mind and two brands that could help achieve each goal. After a questionnaire measuring the association strength, participants were asked to imagine that they had attained the high-level goals (or low-level goals) and report the affect they would experience. Both promotion-type (happy) and prevention-type (relax) were reported. They were also asked to indicate their promotion (happy) and prevention (relax) affect towards each of the brand.

A series of multiple regressions indicated that participants’ affect towards a brand was a function of 1) their affect felt towards the attainment of the goal (both the magnitude–how strong the affect is and the type –promotion or prevention affect), and 2) the association strength between the goal and the brand. In other words, the affect towards a consumer goal was being transferred to the related brands, in proportion to their association strength. These results were consistent with the prediction of goal system theory (Kruglanski et al. 2002) and replicated previous research on affect transfer (Fishbach et al. 2004).

The results also found that different types of affect are transferred with respect to high-level goals and low-level goals. Specifically, affect associated with the attainment of promotion goals (happy) transfers from a high-level goal to its associated brands, whereas affect associated with the attainment of prevention goals (relax) transfers from a low-level goal to its associated brands. This finding is consistent with the recent research (Zhang and Mitchell 2004) showing a relationship between high-level goals and a promotion focus and a relationship between low-level goals and a prevention focus.

Taking together, these two studies demonstrated that brands can be associated with consumer goals as attainment means, and both the activation and affect can transport from goals to the related brands. These intriguing results, together with the differences between high-level and low-level goals, provide substantial insight into many areas of consumer behavior, such as brand choice and consumer brand relationship.

REFERENCES
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