Special Session Summary  the Influence of Primary and Secondary Goals on Consumer Decision Making

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SESSION OVERVIEW

A multitude of goals can potentially influence consumers in their day-to-day activities. Some of these goals are primary (be they consciously or unconsciously activated), whereas others are relatively more secondary. How do these goals interact with one another to influence consumers’ every day decisions, especially when these goals conflict with one another? This session brings together three recent empirical papers that examine this question.

In the opening paper presented by Arie Kruglanski (Kruglanski, Chun, Sleeth-Keppler, and Friedman, 2004), the authors distinguish between two different types of goals that can influence people’s behavior – primary focal goals that are cognitively accessible vs. secondary background goals that are activated unconsciously. Using a series of experiments, they found that when only possible, individuals are guided by the principle of multifinality and choose such means that serve both the focal and the background goals, even though they are unaware of the latter. However, when the means serving the focal goals conflict with those serving the background goals, the focal goals tend to take precedence in determining consumers’ choices and preferences. For example, when participants were asked to choose among three soft drinks, their focal goal (determining the tastiness of drinks) dominated their conflicting background goal (identification vs. disidentification with the U.S.) in their choice. However, when the drinks were equally instrumental to attainment of the focal goal, the choice between them was determined by their instruments with regard to the background goal, again without the individuals’ awareness of this being so.

Arthur Markman, Miguel Brendl, and Kyungil Kim (2004) examine more directly the relationship between the strength of primary goal activation and preferences in the second paper. In their previous work (Brendl, Markman, and Messner 2003), they found that when specific primary goals are activated, people’s preference for goal-related objects increases (valuation), and their preference for goal-unrelated objects decreases (devaluation). In this work, they delve more deeply into the link between primary goals and such valuation/devaluation, demonstrating that the degree of valuation and devaluation of an object depends on the degree of association of the object to the primary goal. They also discovered that people’s goals are specific. For example, invoking consumer’s need to eat in the morning causes them to value breakfast foods but not dinner foods.

Finally, the third paper illustrates the distinction between consumers’ own primary spending goals, and other secondary goals primed by their environment in a real-world shopping context. Specifically, Leonard Lee and Dan Ariely (2004) ran a series of field experiments at a local convenience store to investigate the mechanisms that underlie retailer promotions involving conditional coupons (e.g. “Spend $50 and get $10 off”). They found that in addition to pure economic reasons, consumers have a propensity to use these coupons to set concrete (secondary) spending goals, and subsequently to complete these goals they have set. The experiments demonstrate that this tendency stems primarily from consumers’ lack of clear (primary) spending goals of their own when entering the store.

All in all, these three papers together provide substantial insights into the structure and consequences of goals and motivation. Given the fundamental questions and findings in these papers, we believe that this session will be of broad interest to psychologists and consumer behavior researchers, and will contribute significantly to enhancing our understanding of the goal-driven facets of our day-to-day behavior.

References


EXTENDED ABSTRACTS


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In Nisbett and Wilson’s (1977) research, passersby at a department store chose among four different nightgowns of a similar quality, or among four identical pairs of nylon stockings. A strong position effect was found such that the two rightmost objects in the array were heavily over chosen. Intriguingly, participants seemed unaware of their bias. Whatever it was that systematically pushed their choices rightward, seems to have operated outside their awareness. To the extent that choices are made in the service of individuals’ specific goals, some goals might have operated here as well, without being consciously represented.

At that time, the notion that goals can operate outside individuals’ awareness would probably have been considered as outlandish by social cognition researchers. Yet this day and age, this possibility has been supported in manifold experiments and is part and parcel of the received world view in motivated cognition (see e.g., Bargh and Banrdollar 1996; Kruglanski et. al. 2002). Thus, participants in Nisbett and Wilson’s (1977) studies, too, may have been driven by a goal of which they were essentially unaware to prefer the items placed on the right hand side of the array over their left-positioned alternatives. Specifically, participants in the Nisbett and Wilson (1977) studies may have had two goals: (1) Making a reasonable choice, constituting a “focal”, completely conscious, goal that would have been equally gratified by any object in the array, (2) reaching quick closure after inspecting the entire array, constituting a “background goal” of which the participants might not have been consciously aware. Both goals would have been satisfied by the rightmost objects in the array, which would have been the last ones to inspect following an initial, necessary, sweep from left to right. In other words, the rightmost objects would have been more multifinal, hence more appealing, than their preceding, left lying alternatives.

We conducted three experiments to examine these notions. The first manipulated the need for cognitive closure assumed responsible for the unexplained position effect in Nisbett and Wilson’s (1977) research. The second study employed different background goals, consisting of identification or disidentification with one’s university. The third used identification/disidentification...
with the American culture as background goals and investigated whether the effect of unconsciously activated “background goals” would be eliminated if their pursuit would conflict with the “focal goal.”

Study 1
Participants were given the (focal) goal of choosing among four pairs of (actually) identical athletic socks, the pair that was of the best quality. To manipulate the “background goal”, participants in one condition were placed under time pressure to heighten their need for closure (Kruglanski and Webster 1996). In a second condition, no time pressure was applied and participants were given accuracy instructions to reduce their need for closure. As predicted, we found that the rightward position effect replicated in the time pressure condition and was eliminated in the accuracy condition. Subsequent inquiry revealed that participants were completely unaware of their choices having anything to do with time pressure or accuracy concerns.

Study 2
Our next study investigated possible multifinality effects involving the “background goals” of identifying or disidentifying with one’s home university. We treated the desire to identify or disidentify with the University of Maryland, College Park as “background goals” activated by pride or shame-inducing events that visited the UMDCP student body in 2001. The pride-inducing event consisted of inclusion of the UMDCP basketball team (the Terps) in the group of finalists (the “Final Four”) of an important inter-collegiate tournament (the 2001 NCAA tournament). The shame-inducing event consisted of an outbreak of vandalism in College Park in the aftermath of the loss to Duke University at the semifinal game. University of Maryland College Park (UMDCP) students were asked to recall either one or the other event and to report their feelings about it.

In a subsequent context, participants chose which of two swaths of fabric is more durable. In fact, both swaths were of the same material only one was colored red, representing the UMD school color whereas the other was colored purple, representing a non-UMD color. We assumed that a choice of the red-colored swath would be multifinal with regard to the both “focal” and the “background” goals. Indeed, we found that the red swath was chosen more often than its purple alternative in the pride condition. By contrast, the purple-colored swath was chosen more often in the shame condition. That occurred, again, without the participants demonstrating any awareness of the true reasons for their choices.

Study 3
The third study induced again the background goals of identification and disidentification, this time with respect to the United States of America. In the pride condition, assumed to foster the identification goal, participants were reminded of the voluntarism in New York City in the aftermath of 9/11. In the shame condition, participants were reminded of the possibility that deadly Anthrax packages were dispatched by Americans. Participants were subsequently asked to select the tastiest of three soft drinks, Diet Coke, Diet Pepsi, and Shoppers’ Cola. By pretest, we found that in our participants’ population Coke was considered a more American drink than Pepsi. In one condition the alleged Shoppers’ Cola was made to taste inferior to both alleged Coke and Pepsi that actually tasted identically (constituted the same drink). In the other condition, the Shoppers’ Cola was made to taste superior to the “Coke” and the “Pepsi” that, again, tasted identically. We found evidence for multifinality in the condition where the Coke and the Pepsi were superior in taste to the Shoppers Cola. There, the Coke was chosen over the Pepsi in the pride condition and the Pepsi over the Coke in the shame condition. Where the Coke and the Pepsi were inferior in taste to the Shoppers’ Cola the latter was chosen over both former drinks attesting to the primacy of the focal goal (determining the tastiness of drinks) over the background goals (identification vs. disidentification with the U.S.) in the case of goal conflict.

References

“Goal Strength, Preference, and the Structure of Goals”
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Predicting consumers’ preferences requires understanding the nature of people’s goals and the relationship between the strength of goal activation and preferences. Neither of these facets of preference is well mapped out. To address this issue, we start with a finding from our previous research that as a goal increases in activation there are valuation effects, whereby preference for goal-related objects increases, and there are also devaluation effects, whereby preference for goal-unrelated objects decreases.

We begin by exploring the relationship between the similarity of objects to an active goal and the degree of valuation and devaluation of those objects in two studies involving habitual smokers. In one study, we manipulated people’s need to smoke, and then had them evaluate a set of consumer products. Some were brands of cigarettes, some were objects instrumentally related to smoking (e.g., a lighter), some were foods associated with smoking (e.g., Dr. Pepper), some were nonfoods associated with smoking (e.g., a Marlboro baseball cap), and finally some were items unrelated to smoking (e.g., a DVD player).

In this study, we observed significant valuation effects for brands of cigarettes and for objects instrumentally related to smoking. We observed significant devaluation for objects unrelated to smoking. An intermediate pattern was observed for the foods and nonfoods associated with smoking. This finding suggests that the degree of valuation and devaluation of an object depends on the degree of association of the object to the focal goal.

In a second study, we explored whether this preference was related to the degree of accessibility of the representations of the objects. Once again, need to smoke was manipulated, and participants both evaluated the objects and performed a Stroop task in which they had to identify the color of the font in which the name of the item was printed. The greater the accessibility of the concept, the longer it should take to identify the color of the font. The pattern of response times to identify the color name mirrored the pattern of
valuation and devaluation. The color of the font was identified significantly more slowly in the high need than in the low need condition for brands of cigarettes and instrumentally related items. The color was identified significantly more quickly in the high need than in the low need condition for cigarette unrelated items. Finally, no significant difference between need conditions was found for the associated foods and nonfoods.

Given this pattern, we then addressed the nature of people's goals. It has been difficult to study goals, because people have no conscious access to the end states of their goals. We can assess the end states of people's goals by examining the pattern of valuation and devaluation associated with items. Objects that are squarely within a goal should show a pattern of valuation. Objects clearly outside a goal should show devaluation. Items associated with the goal, but not within the goal should show an intermediate pattern.

To explore the end-states of people's goals, we examined eating behavior. We manipulated people's need to eat and examined whether the need to eat is general (i.e., the need to eat food) or specific (i.e., the need to eat particular kinds of food). We used a contextual manipulation that might influence the specificity of a goal by bringing participants to the lab either at 9am (where breakfast foods might be most appropriate) or at 4pm (where dinner foods might be most appropriate). Participants evaluated a set of items that included foods related to breakfast, foods related to dinner, and nonfoods. The data were consistent with the interpretation that people's goals are specific. In the morning, we observed valuation for breakfast foods, devaluation for nonfoods, and an intermediate pattern for dinner foods.

These data have important theoretical and practical implications. On the theoretical side, they promise to resolve long-standing questions about the nature of people's goals. The pattern of valuation and devaluation can be used to map out the specificity of people's goals, despite people's inability to articulate the end states of their goals. The present data suggest that goals may sometimes be specific. However, this finding needs to be explored at a variety of different goal strengths and for both cognitive and physiologically-based goals.

On the practical side, this research demonstrates potential positive and negative influences of goal activation. Retailers should activate people's goals in contexts where they are only trying to sell products relating to the focal goal. Thus, activating a goal to buy a car using a test-drive is a good idea, because car dealers care about selling cars, but not car-unrelated products. In contrast, supermarkets should be wary of activating the need to eat, because it may hamper sales of nonfood products.

"Conditional Coupons: Preference Uncertainty and Spending Goals"
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Dan Ariely, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Conditional coupons are pervasively used as a promotional device in today's retail marketplace. These coupons typically entitle customers to a discount or fixed monetary rebate if they spend at least a stipulated amount (e.g., "Spend $X or more and get $Y off"). Given the popularity of these coupons, it is important to try to understand how they work. A straightforward answer stems from the financial incentives that such coupons create by decreasing the cost of buying additional (marginial) product items. In addition to such incentives, we propose that these coupons, particularly with their spending conditions, can provide concrete spending goals for consumers, changing their shopping agendas.

To test this hypothesis, a series of six field experiments was conducted at a local convenience store. In each experiment, we randomly distributed different types of promotional coupon to customers as they entered the store, and analyzed the influence of these coupons on both the amounts and patterns of their subsequent spending.

In Experiment 1, we demonstrated the basic goal effects by distributing three different types of coupon, all having a face value of $1. One type of coupon entitled customers to an instant rebate of $1 if they spent at least $5 (conditional-$5 coupon), another had the same rebate value but with a required minimum expenditure of $10 (conditional-$10 coupon), and the third type of coupon offered a rebate regardless of spending (unconditional coupon). We found that customers who were given either type of conditional coupon spent significantly more than those who received either the unconditional coupon or no coupons at all (all ps<0.0001). Most central to the goal explanation, we found that customers who were given conditional coupons tend to spend amounts that clustered above the respective condition values ($5/$10) on the coupons (which we shall call the goal-clustering effect), providing initial support for the goal hypothesis.

Experiment 1 suffered from one major problem—a large number of customers who did not qualify for the rebate did not return the coupons (despite being given lottery incentives to return them as they exited the store). This self-selection problem poses a serious challenge to the interpretation of the results from Experiment 1. In Experiment 2 (as well as later experiments), we corrected this bias by recording customer spending and disbursing the rebates directly to customers at the cashiers. The results from Experiment 2 replicated the results from Experiment 1—there was a significant increase in average spending when customers were given conditional coupons (p<0.0001), as well as a similar goal-clustering effect.

Nonetheless, the effects described thus far could be explained by either the goal perspective or standard economics. From an economic perspective, conditional coupons that provide rebates have the effect of reducing the marginal cost of buying an additional item (assuming that the purchase of this item would allow the customer to meet the condition on the coupon), and can thus induce more spending. To provide an initial test that contrasts the goal perspective and the economics perspective, we included a conditional coupon that had a very low requirement level in Experiment 3. From an economic perspective, setting a lower condition value should only make the rebate easier to obtain, and should still lead to an increase in overall spending. On the other hand, the goal hypothesis would predict a decrease in spending, given that the lower condition value would induce the corresponding setting of a lower goal. In addition, in order to test the generality of goals, we introduced a different type of goal—one that was dependent on the number of items purchased and not on the amount spent. As in the earlier experiments, the results showed a similar goal-clustering effect with this new type of goal. More notably, we also found a significant decrease in the number of items bought by customers given the low condition (1-item) coupon (M=2.11) relative to those not given any coupons at all (M=2.69, p=0.03).

The next three experiments were designed and conducted to test more directly the goal explanation. In Experiment 4, we distributed two types of coupon—a conditional-$6 coupon and an unconditional coupon. However, half the customers who entered the store were asked to estimate how much they thought they would spend in the store before receiving the coupons. Consistent with the goal hypothesis, this prior questioning significantly attenuated the degree to which customers used the coupon conditions to set goals.
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for their spending (p<0.05 for interaction effect). We believe that the initial questioning had the effect of increasing customers’ psychological commitment to their own spending goals, hence making it less likely for them to use the coupon conditions to set goals for their spending.

While the results of Experiment 4 are in line with the goal hypothesis, the manipulation used is potentially open to criticism since only half the customers were asked a question. Plausible alternative explanations include the “mere-measurement hypothesis” (Morwitz, Johnson, and Schmittlein 1993) and pure reactance (Simonson, Carmon, and O’Curry 1994). To rule out these explanations, in Experiment 5, conducted in the evenings, every customer was asked a question before receiving either a conditional coupon or an unconditional coupon. Half the customers were asked to recall what they had bought the last time they had visited the store in the evening (i.e. a relevant past experience), whereas the other half of the customers were asked to recall what they had bought the last time they had visited the store in the morning (i.e. an irrelevant past experience). Consistent with the results in Experiment 4, we found that the effectiveness of the conditional coupons in increasing spending was attenuated when customers were asked to recall a relevant experience, when their current spending goals were potentially made more concrete (p=0.02 for the interaction effect.)

A more implicit test of the goal explanation was carried out in Experiment 6 by manipulating the location at which the coupons were distributed. Instead of handing out all the coupons outside the store, we distributed half the coupons along the aisles at the back of the store. (Presumably, at this later stage, consumers had more defined goals for their spending at the store). Interestingly, we found that customers who received the coupons inside the store were less influenced by the coupons--there was a significant interaction effect between the type of coupon and the location of coupon distribution on spending (p=0.02). Arguably, customers who received coupons inside the store were more decided on what to buy and how much to spend, and were thus less influenced by the conditional coupons.

In sum, the results from this set of experiments demonstrate that consumers have vaguely defined objectives when entering a store, and at that point, different persuasion efforts that allude to some goal can have a significant effect on their consumption behavior. More generally, these results provide additional support for the goal perspective that motivation and planned actions in day-to-day life are directed at the fulfillment of some end state.

References