Tomorrow Will Be Better: the Effect of Optimism Bias on Choice of Goal Pursuit

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When Thinking Beats Doing: The Role of Optimistic Expectations on Goal-Based Choice

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Abstract

Would anticipating workout make you more or less likely to order pizza for dinner? We propose that optimism bias leads people to believe they’ll achieve more goal pursuit in the future than in the past, which is inferred either as higher commitment to the goal in the future or more progress will be made in the future. As a result, higher anticipated commitment leads to more goal-consistent actions whereas more anticipated progress justifies more disengagement from the goal. Three studies, including lab experiments and field studies, provide support for the predictions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

With the presence of multiple conflicting goals, self-regulatory goal pursuit of one goal could be understood in terms of progress toward the goal or in terms of commitment to the goal (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Kruglanski et al., 2002). The progress framing of goal pursuit emphasizes how initial goal pursuit reduces the efforts needed for the final goal attainment, whereas commitment framing highlights how initial goal pursuit increases the value of the final goal attainment. Prior research demonstrated that framing goal pursuit as progress has a liberating effect and fosters goal disengagement, whereas framing it as commitment has a motivational effect and elicits more goal-consistent actions. For example, when workout is framed as progress toward the goal of being healthy, going to the gym elicits the perception of partial goal attainment and suggests that effort could be withdrawn to pursue alternative goals such as enjoyable tasty but fatty food; when workout is framed as commitment to the goal of being healthy, going to the gym signals the commitment to the goal and thus suggests more consistent actions, such as refraining from tasty but fatty food, should be performed to ensure the goal attainment.

When deciding on subsequent choice of actions, people consider their achieved goal pursuit as well as anticipated future goal pursuit. Like achieved goal pursuit, future goal pursuit is also cognitively represented as means leading to the goal attainment. We therefore propose that anticipated goal pursuit can be similarly framed as commitment to the goal or as progress toward the goal before the actual performance and has similar motivational and liberating effects on choice of actions. Moreover, because of the optimism bias that characterizes the anticipation about future, people anticipated more goal pursuit in the future than in the past, and therefore infer either higher commitment in the future, or more progress will be made in the future. As a result, compared with framing past goal pursuit, framing future goal pursuit amplifies the motivational effect of commitment framing and the liberating effect of progress framing.

Three studies were conducted to test the hypothesis. In the Study 1, we first asked participants to describe either their workout in the past month or planned workout in the coming month. The subsequent mental framing manipulation was achieved by having participants rate the extent to which they agree with statements that either frame workout as commitment to the goal of being healthy (e.g., “Having worked out so much, I must really care about my health”) or as progress toward the goal of being healthy (e.g., “Having worked out so much, I must really have improved my health.”). We measured participants’ intended duration of workout and (in a separate survey) their interest in healthy food as their motivation to pursue additional goal-consistent actions. The results showed participants planned to workout longer and were more interested in healthy food when they focus on future workout than on past workout under commitment framing, but planned to workout less and showed less interest in healthy food when they focus on future workout than on past workout under progress framing.

Our second experiment replicated Study 1 with actual gym users and offered participants a parting gift instead of indicating behavioral intentions. Participants were offered to choose between a can of sugared soda (unhealthy option) and a bottle of spring water (healthy option). The percentage of participants who chose soda over water was analyzed to exam participants’ likelihood to disen-gage from the health goal. The results showed that participants were more likely to choose soda when they focus on future workout than on past workout under progress framing, although the percentage of soda choosers was not significantly different between future and past condition under commitment framing due to floor effect.

Finally in a third experiment, we manipulated the magnitude of optimism bias about future through mental simulation of goal pursuit (Taylor et al. 1998). Participants either mentally simulated the process of future goal pursuit, which attenuates the optimism bias or the outcome of future goal pursuit, which accentuates the optimism bias, before estimating their planned workout for the future. Then participants completing the mental framing manipulation that was identical to the one used in the last 2 studies. The dependent measure was again their indicated interest in various healthy and unhealthy food items in a separate survey. As expected, when the optimism bias about future goal pursuit became more pronounced, the interest in healthy food as dinner increased under commitment framing, but decreased under progress framing.

Taken together, these studies illustrated that optimism bias amplifies the motivational effect of framing goal pursuit as commitment and the liberating effect of framing goal pursuit as progress. Our findings offered a new perspective in understanding the interaction between cognition and motivation and demonstrated that the optimism bias could be potentially beneficial in terms of enhancing one’s self-regulation in making consistent choices to ensure the final goal attainment. This research also speaks to the broader interest in consistency vs. inconsistency in consumer choices. Adding to the finding that people plan ahead to ensure their current choice would be different from future choices (Read & Loewenstein, 1995; Simonson, 1990) for variety, our findings further suggests that, by inferring future choices as commitment, people also achieve forward-looking consistency by making choices in line with expected choices when consistency (e.g., loyalty) is desired.

REFERENCES:


SESSION SUMMARY

This session was organized around the conference’s transformative consumer research theme and follows its call for research designed for and communicated to consumers. In the spirit of this mission, the session included three current government-funded research programs that address important public health issues. The first project, by Jerome Williams and colleagues, examines the relationship between obesity and other health indicators among minority consumers to environmental factors, such as billboard advertising, and purchasing behavior using scanner data. The second project, by Marty Fishbein and Amy Jordan, investigates the relationship between exposure to sex in the media and AIDS-related sexual behavior. The third project, by Cristel Russell and colleagues, documents the amount and nature of alcohol portrayals in television series to examine how they affect consumers’ attitudes and beliefs about drinking.

As the existence of specialized journals and conferences focusing on public policy issues attests, consumer researchers have long considered the implications of their research for public policy. In addition to providing guidance to policy makers that way, consumer researchers are increasingly answering health organizations’ requests for focused and applied research and developing research programs that center on the issues. Problems such as tobacco, drug, alcohol and excess food consumption, or the HIV-AIDS epidemic plague all societies and ultimately cost nations large sums of money resulting from lost productivity and increased healthcare expenditures. In the spirit of Kotler and Levy’s (1969) original call for extending marketing research outside the traditional for-profit arena, it is crucial for consumer researchers to apply their knowledge of consumer behavior to directly tackle society’s preventable health problems.

In the U.S., a multitude of health organizations strive to better understand these issues. Although each state has its own health research activities, the National Institute of Health (NIH) leads the U.S.’s health research efforts with a total budget exceeding $28 billion, with over 80 percent of the budget going to 50,000+ research grants annually. The NIH’s Office of Extramural Research (OER) has oversight of national behavior research. The OER has continued to see its annual research budget grow to nearly $14 billion; and has increased its efforts to promote applied social science research, including consumer behavior. Presently, academic institutions (excluding medical schools) receive approximately $3 billion of the OER’s overall research budget. This amount continues to increase as the NIH strives to improve the knowledge surrounding influential sources and consumer behavior, in order to improve policies and educational tools for consumers in the hopes of improving public health.

All three research programs presented in this session are funded through government grants. All three document the themes and prevalence of damaging health-related information across a variety of media in order to understand how they affect consumers’ beliefs and behaviors. We take a broad approach to the consumer environment by documenting the effects of both traditional advertising messages (Williams et al.) and those messages imbedded in the media content (Fishbein and Jordan), such as product placements (Russell et al.). All projects include a content analytic phase and an effects-testing phase (with scanner data in the first project and survey data in the other two).

“Obesity and the Built Environment: A Tale of Five Cities”

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Obesity has reached pandemic proportions in the U.S. (Flegal et al. 2002; Koplan and Dietz 1999). Environmental intervention approaches are necessary to stem this epidemic, as the environment is becoming increasingly “obesogenic,” particularly in communities of color, and individual-level change efforts have demonstrated little sustainability (Yancey et al. 2004; Fontaine et al. 2003; Sloane et al. 2003; French et al. 2002; Kersh and Morone 2002; Nestle and Jacobsen 2000; Swinburn et al. 1999; King et al. 1995). A similar shift in level of focus of intervention is credited with the dramatic declines in tobacco use and, recently, particularly in California as the leader in this arena, in tobacco-related disease burden, with important lessons for obesity control (Daynard 2004).

A critical but understudied element of the sociocultural environment influencing the food and beverage preferences and purchasing behaviors of Americans is commercial advertising, marketing and promotion (Nestle et al. 1998). The U.S. food industry spends approximately $36 billion per year on advertising (Thomas 1998), making it the second largest advertiser in the American economy (Gallo, 2000). A growing literature endeavors to characterize the cultural variations in commercial advertisements in magazines, on billboards, and on television that may contribute to health risk behavior disparities (Wallack and Dorfman 1994; Mitchell and Greenberg 1995; Pratt and Pratt 1995; 1996; Byrd-Brenner and Grasso 2000; Lohmann and Kant 2000; Hackbarth et al. 2001; Story et al. 2000; Tirodkar and Jain 2003; Wakefield et al. 2003). A pattern of findings demonstrate significantly fewer ads for healthier food/beverage products, e.g., fruits, vegetables and dairy products, in magazines and television shows targeting African Americans compared with those targeting “general audiences,” and a significantly greater number of ads for unhealthy products, e.g., sodas, candy and alcoholic beverages (Pratt and Pratt 1995; Tirodkar and Jain 2003). On billboards in predominantly African-American and Latino neighborhoods, alcohol products were advertised five times as frequently as in predominantly white areas (Hackbarth et al. 2001), and advertising themes included images of sex, youth and affluence to sell these products (Mitchell and Greenberg 1995).

The primary objective of this study is to conduct a content analysis of food, beverage, and physical activity products and services billboard advertisements to test the hypothesis that African Americans and Latinos are disproportionately targeted by advertising of high-energy, low nutrient density food and beverage products, and underexposed to advertising for nutritious food and beverage products and physical activity-related products and services. The study also will describe the attributes of billboard ads which may influence purchasing and consumption of unhealthy food and beverage products and examine weight-related body imagery in billboard ads. Finally, the study will examine the geographical positioning of billboards relative to schools, to exam-