When Behaving Bad Is Good: Self-Regulation Enhancement By Strategic Goal-Deviation in Consumption
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SHORT ABSTRACT
Do we always need to perform behaviors that bring the goal that we are striving for closer, in order to eventually attain it? We propose that for goals that require inhibitory behaviors over extended periods of time, such as in weight loss, training, and saving, it may be beneficial to temporarily not only abstain from goal pursuit, but actually to perform behavior that runs counter to the overarching focal goal, but which allows the replenishment of self-regulatory resources, increasing goal-attainment likelihood. Results from five studies revealed that when consumers follow intermittent sets of regulatory activities about which they have prior knowledge, they show lower ego-depletion, higher motivation for goal-pursuit and higher coping ability.

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reasons, ‘NFC,’ and ‘choice type’ showing that depending on the choice perspective (self or others), the ease effect on the choice outcome differs. This three-way interaction was the only significant effect. In specific, when people made a choice for themselves, those with high NFC relied primarily on their subjective ease experience. They were more likely to choose N.Y. over L.V. after generating 2 (vs. 8) reasons to go to N.Y. However, when they predicted similar others’ choices, they relied more on the number of reasons they generated. They were more likely to choose N.Y. over L.V. after generating 8, rather than 2, reasons. On the other hand, those with low NFC, when making a choice for themselves, were more likely to choose N.Y. after generating 8 reasons than 2, suggesting that they did not make use of subjective difficulty in making their decision and simply relied on the number heuristic (i.e., “more reasons are better”). However, when predicting others’ choices, they were more likely to choose N.Y. after generating 2 reasons than 8, consistent with the possibility that taking others’ perspective generated more cognitive effort. For high NFC people, our results replicate the previous finding that people sometimes use the ease or difficulty of generating reasons as a guide to their choices; however, according to our data, what their subjective difficulty of generating reasons informs may be neither about the scarcity of good reasons nor about the validity of the reasons themselves. It seems to be rather about their diagnosticity for the person’s own preferences. Our future study will look more closely into the mechanisms for low NFC people.

References


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Extended Abstract
Most important goals cannot be attained without considerable self-regulation and effort (Cantor and Blanton, 1996). During the process to attain the desirable end state that the personal goal focuses on, consumers need to choose between multiple goals (Kruglanski, Shah, Fishbach, Friedman, Chun and Sleeth-Keppler, 2002), to restrain “irresistible” impulses (Baumeister, 2002), and need commitment to persistently pursue the current goals (Brunstein, 1993; Locke and Latham, 2002). Altogether, the process of goal striving can be quite exhausting leading many times to interruptions of current goal-pursuit (Baumeister, Heatherton and Tice, 1994).

A common assumption in the literature is that in order to reach a specific goal, consumers need to progress through some sequence of steps when making a choice (Bettman, 1979), consistently regulating their activities in alignment with their focal goals (Hacker, 1985). For example, Bettman (1979) proposed that in order to reach goals, a set of sub-goals must be defined, defining a plan to reach the specific goal. Analogously, Kruglanski and colleagues (2002) proposed that each goal can be depicted as a goal-system, where the super-ordinate goal is cognitively connected to its various sub-goals or way-stations en route to that goal. Hacker (1985) considered that any activity that is not organized towards the goal should typically be characterized as trial and error.

Clearly, the systematic pursuit of goals over time can be quite exhausting since cognitive and other resources are spent over time to keep commitment and focus on the current long-term goal (Kruglanski et al., 2002). Thus, controlling self-behavior requires the expenditure of resources that become depleted during the self-regulation process, resembling a muscle’s ability (Muraven and Baumeister, 2000; Schmeichel and Baumeister, 2004). And, if the muscle metaphor of willpower generalizes, then because the muscle needs periods of rest and relaxation to recuperate and to strengthen, willpower will also require its moments in the sun. This is the thesis that we examine in the present research.

Many goals that consumers pursue, such as dieting, saving, and exercising, entail inhibitory behaviors that need to be executed over extended periods of time, involving effort and need for high self-regulation. Such inhibitory activity strains willpower, and it does so progressively when the inhibition needs to be maintained over extended periods of time. Long-term projects on which consumers work repeatedly, sometimes with little optimism for a quick or easy finish, strain the limits of self-regulation for practically everyone (Mischel, Cantor and Feldman, 1996). Thus, it is likely that consumers, when pursuing goals that involve inhibitory behaviors for extended periods of time, may need periods of rest and relaxation to recuperate and to strengthen self-regulatory resources.

The issue then is if we always need to perform the behaviors that bring the desired end-state closer, in order to eventually attain it? Or, if there are conditions that is good to temporarily deviate strategically from direct goal pursuit, in order to eventually attain the goal?
For goals that require inhibitory behaviors over extended periods of time, such as in dieting, exercising, saving and so forth, it may be beneficial to temporarily not only abstain from goal pursuit, but actually to perform behavior that runs counter to the overarching focal goal, but which allows the replenishment of self-regulatory resources. Therefore, in the spirit of the muscle metaphor of willpower, we propose that the temporary pursuit of non-regulatory behaviors, even when counter productive to the overarching goal, can act as a mechanism to deal with immediate self-regulatory depletion, can contribute to willpower enhancement, increasing likelihood of goal-pursuit and contributing to eventual long-term goal-attainment.

We hypothesize that in goal-pursuit processes where individuals foresee that high self-regulatory behaviors will be needed to attain the focal goal, intermittent goal-striving processes (i.e., goal-focused activities with goal-relaxation moments) will be preferred, leading to lower levels of ego-depletion and increasing likelihood of goal attainment. By exerting goal-relaxation moments, we also predict an enhancement of motivation to proceed with self-regulatory tasks, as well as an increase in consumers’ ability to cope with self-regulatory demands.

Results from five experimental studies demonstrate that the inclusion of a priori moments of goal-relaxation in self-regulatory processes, when counter productive to immediate goal-attainment, increase the likelihood of long-term focal goal attainment. The findings demonstrate the importance that goal-rest periods are defined before initiating self-regulatory activities, i.e., a priori. This prior knowledge about the occurrence of such goal-relaxation periods. Furthermore, the inclusion of goal-relaxation moments, in which inhibitory self-regulatory processes do not take place (e.g., interruption of dieting behavior to eat “normally” for one day), increases motivation to attain the goal, enhances action likelihood of proceeding with self-regulatory activities, leads to lower depletion, and increases ability to develop coping strategies to deal with self-regulatory issues. Consumers also clearly showed preference for engaging in self-regulatory activities where goal-relaxation periods are included. Taken together, these results provide support that for goals requiring inhibitory behaviors over extended periods of time, the likelihood of eventual goal-attainment is higher when consumers engage in an intermittent goal-striving process, where relaxation-goal activities are entailed, than when they engage in a straight goal process, where all the activities are aligned with focal goal.

Overall, this research contributes to a better understanding of self-regulatory behavior for goal-attainment, emphasizing the importance of temporal activity/planning in goal-striving. Because goals play an essential role in consumer behavior (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 1999), are present in most behaviors of daily life (Cantor and Blanton, 1996), and its pursuit involves coping with challenges, temptations and frustrations (Mischel, Cantor and Feldman, 1996), this research sheds some light on when it is good in the long run to be sometimes bad in the short run.

References
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