Is Failure a Blessing Or a Curse? Behavioral Goal Violation, Cognitive Dissonance and Consumer Welfare

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Consumers frequently fail to perform behaviors that would enhance their personal wellbeing or the welfare of greater society. What do these behavioral failures mean regarding consumers' pursuit of higher-order welfare-enhancing goals? Drawing on the theory of cognitive dissonance and the hierarchy of goals, we propose a compelling theoretical framework to study the relationship between subgoal failures and subsequent commitment to an endgoal. An experiment in the context of pro-environmental consumer goals provides support for our cognitive dissonance-based predictions by showing that failing an environmental IQ test (a subgoal) results in cognitive dissonance and increased commitment to the environment (an endgoal), but only for consumers who have incorporated pro-environmental goals in their self-concept.

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EXTED ABSTRACT

Consumers frequently fail to perform behaviors such as recycling, conserving energy, and eating healthy that would enhance their personal wellbeing or the welfare of greater society. Currently, we do not have a good conceptual understanding regarding the direction and scale of consequences associated with failing to achieve such behavioral goals. The present research proposes an integrative theoretical framework to investigate the effect of behavioral failures on consumers’ pursuit of welfare-enhancing goals. As a contribution to the extant literature, we propose that cognitive dissonance is a primary underlying mechanism for observed effects of subgoal failures. Our research also takes into account the hierarchical structure of goals (Bagozzi and Dholakia 1999) with a particular focus on the relationship between subgoal failures and subsequent changes to the commitment to an endgoal.

Extant research has documented predominantly negative effects of behavioral failures on task performance (Shah and Kruglanski 2002), emotions (Cron et al. 2005), subsequent goal setting (Ilies and Judge 2005), self-efficacy (Bandura 1989), and persistence at a similar behavior (Soman and Cheema 2004). A limited number of studies have also suggested some potential moderators for this negative main effect (e.g., Kernis, Brockner, and Frankel 1989; Fishbach, Dhar, and Zhang 2006). However, no research to date has attempted to provide a unifying theoretical framework to account for all these observed effects.

Based on the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), we predict that subgoal failure will have negative effects on felt psychological discomfort as well as on the commitment to an endgoal as compared to subgoal accomplishment. On average, people will attempt to reduce dissonance by trivializing the overall endgoal and thus, will adjust their level of commitment to the endgoal downward. We further predict that failing a subgoal will have an indirect negative effect on subsequent subgoal setting through downgrading endgoal commitment. Notably, we contend that these negative effects will be reversed for some people. Based on the self-concept view of dissonance (Aronson 1968), we hypothesize that self-concordance of an endgoal, which is defined as “the degree to which stated goals express enduring interests and values” (Sheldon and Elliot 1999), will serve as a mitigator of the detrimental effects of initial failure. Specifically, self-concordance is expected to increase the endgoal commitment of people experiencing a subgoal failure.

These predictions are tested via an experiment in the context of pro-environmental goals. We conceptualize the focal endgoal as “helping to create a healthy, clean, and sustainable environment” and the subgoal as the individual performance on an environmental IQ test. One hundred and six study participants were randomly assigned to either success or failure feedback condition. Our major dependent variable was goal commitment which was assessed with regards to the endgoal description given above. Subsequent subgoal setting was operationalized as the number of hours participants were willing to allocate to recycling and volunteering activities in a campus-wide environmental awareness week.

We find empirical support for our predictions, indicating that cognitive dissonance is indeed a plausible theoretical base to explain the effects of subgoal failures. Participants receiving failure feedback on the environmental IQ test reported higher levels of psychological discomfort and lower levels of commitment to the endgoal than those receiving success feedback. As expected, this negative effect on endgoal commitment indirectly reflected on the number of hours allocated to environmental activities. In the failure feedback condition, self-concordance of the environmental endgoal had a positive direct effect on goal commitment and a positive indirect effect on subsequent goal setting, whereas in the success feedback condition this effect was non-significant.

The current research makes a notable contribution to the goal literature by introducing a compelling yet parsimonious theoretical framework, which may account for the extant findings on goal failures as well as generate new research hypotheses and propose fruitful directions for future research. Another contribution of our research is to incorporate the goal hierarchy in the study of behavioral failures and illuminate the long-term and large-scale consequences of discrete lapses of behavior as opposed to immediate lower-level outcomes. Also, we test our predictions in a context which is atypical of performance studies in the goal literature, where the predominant experimental stimuli are verbal or analytical tasks or academic accomplishments. By applying our framework to actual pro-environmental goals pursued by most consumers, we aim to establish the ecological validity of our findings and generalizability of our framework to welfare-enhancing consumer goals. Importantly, our findings indicate that failing to perform welfare-enhancing behaviors does not necessarily have detrimental effects on consumer welfare. When such behaviors are concordant with consumers’ self-concept, they will continue pursuing the welfare-enhancing goals regardless of incidental failures.

We further believe that our research contributes to cognitive dissonance literature by introducing a new experimental paradigm (i.e., goal failure) which could be used in future dissonance studies and extending the self-concept view of dissonance via the integration of a goal’s concordance with one’s self. Future researchers will definitely benefit from further investigating the propositions of the cognitive dissonance theory and testing them in the context of goal failures. Identifying factors that affect the emergence and magnitude of dissonance in the face of failure as well as potential mechanisms to reduce this negative state of tension will improve our understanding of the large-scale effects of small-scale failures. We know that consumers will continue failing to recycle, conserve energy, eat healthy, or perform other desirable behaviors. Nonetheless, we believe that a deeper insight into the failure process might in fact help identify ways to translate consumers’ behavioral lapses into amplified motivation to pursue welfare-enhancing goals.

References


DECOMPOSITION MODEL OF THE TOTAL STORE PURCHASE AND ITS APPLICATION

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

To investigate customers’ purchase behavior, researchers usually decompose the total store purchase (TSP) into the product of average single purchase and patronage frequency within a certain period of time. Previous study holds an assumption that single purchase payment (SPP) and inter-purchase time (IPT) are two independent variables (e.g. Colombo & Jiang 1999; Fader, Hardie & Lee 2005; Schmittlein & Peterson 1994). Though it does not mean that previous researchers believe SPP and IPT are actually independent, the independent assumption is widely used in the analyses of purchase data tendency to keep mathematics tractable.

Instead of using the previous assumption, we propose a decomposition model of TSP based on the assumption that SPP and IPT are interdependent. The new assumption is discreetly examined based on the observation and analysis of consumer purchase behavior. We divide consumers’ purchase behavior into three stages: whether to go shopping or not, which store to go, and finally how much to purchase. With the analysis of these three stages, it is quite clear that SPP and IPT are interdependent. Previous purchase quantity (represented by SPP) and how long it has been last will influence together the decision of whether to go shopping or not. If the customer decide to do shopping in the target store, current IPT for the certain store is determined. Then previous SPP and IPT will exert their impacts on purchase quantity decision, thus current SPP is obtained.

However, the interdependency of SPP and IPT could probably be concealed by a seemingly insignificant correlation coefficient. For each customer within a target store, we propose that there exists an upper limit of total demand, the changing of which may lead to insignificant correlation coefficient. If the limit of total demand does not change much, the more SPP is, the longer IPT will be, and vice versa. This is constraint effect of the total demand. But if the upper limit changes, which means a customer focus his/her purchase more (or less) on a certain store, the SPP will increase (decrease) while IPT will simultaneously be shorter (longer). This is called changing effect of the total demand.

A model is developed to manifest the interdependency while decomposing TSP. We use simultaneous equations instead of joint-distribution approach to deal with the mathematical problems (Schmittlein & Peterson 1994). Stochastic models with covariates are used for each equation to capture random factors (Gamma-Gamma model with covariates is introduced for SPP and Exponential-Gamma model with covariates for IPT). With those models, the impact of marketing efforts could also be introduced into the model as covariates. By doing so, this model would explain how those marketing variables affect SPP and IPT separately, and therefore affect the total purchase.

We use our model to analyze customers’ purchase behavior in a certain supermarket. A sample set of 70 households and 720 purchase records is chosen from CTR Market Research’s panel. These records are kept from chain stores of the supermarket within 13 weeks. The result shows that the constraint effect and changing effect of total demand do exist. With the constraint effect, SPP and IPT do not simultaneously change towards the managers’ will. Thus the correlation coefficient of SPP and patronage frequency (PF, PF=Time/IPT) should be negative. However, while the upper limit changes (changing effect), it is possible that the correlation coefficient is insignificant, and this may lead to misunderstanding that SPP and IPT are independent.

With the introduction of marketing variables as covariates, we find that the result is much more useful than directly relate these variables to TSP. The result shows different impacts of a marketing variable on SPP and IPT. When we use a marketing strategy, we should carefully investigate both what it does to SPP and what it does to IPT. If we only keep eyes on a general result, it may mislead our decision making or incline us to miss a certain valuable commercial opportunities. Thus, with our model, the effects of these marketing variables on TSP are also decomposed, and more useful information could be used for research and decision making.

In conclusion, our interdependency assumption focuses on customers’ real purchase behavior, rather than on the analysis of data tendency. We prove that SPP and IPT are highly interdependent. Using correlation coefficient is not a reasonable way to tell whether SPP and IPT are independent or not. The model we develop meets the requirement that the interdependency of SPP and IPT should be incorporated in a TSP decomposition model. Furthermore, our model is able to take marketing variables into consideration, and decompose their effects on TSP.

REFERENCES