ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

Building Character: Effects of Lay Theories of Self-Control on the Selection of Products For Children

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This research studies the effect of consumers' lay theories of self-control on their choices of products for young children. Four experiments demonstrate that people who believe that self-control is a limited resource that can be increased over time (i.e., limited-malleable theorists) are more likely to try and teach children to improve their self-control. Limited-malleable theorists take their children less frequently to fast food restaurants, allow them fewer unhealthy snacks, and prefer educational to entertaining television programs for them. They also prefer gifts that teach delayed gratification by delivering greater value in the long- than the short-term.

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Consumer Motivation: Identifying Factors that Increase Goal Adherence

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SESSION OVERVIEW

How can marketers, managers and other social agents motivate people to adhere to their long-term goals? According to goal research, the process of goal pursuit involves setting a goal, which then motivates the exercise of self-control toward selection of congruent actions and overcoming obstacles (e.g., Carver & Scheier 1998; Mischel 1984). This session will contribute to goal literature by identifying some important factors that determine the strength of a person's motivation toward goal pursuit. All three papers explore distinct motivators (goal commitment and lack of progress, high-versus low-construal level, and consumers' lay theories on self-control) that influence the likelihood of adhering to a long-term goal.

In the first paper, Koo and Fishbach identify two factors that increase motivation: goal commitment and lack of goal progress. They find that the focus on accomplished actions increases goal adherence by signaling goal commitment, whereas the focus on unaccomplished actions increases goal adherence by signaling lack of progress. Specifically, they show that emphasizing accomplished actions increases motivation when commitment is low and uncertain (thus when commitment is under consideration), for example it increases motivation to study for a relatively unimportant exam, and to make first-time contributions to a charity. Emphasizing unaccomplished actions increases motivation when commitment is high and certain and a person is concerned with the level of goal progress, for example it increases motivation to study for an important exam, and to make repeated contributions to a charity.

In a second paper, Fujita argues that how an event is mentally represented by consumers influences the motivation to adhere to a long-term goal. Abstract (high-level) vs. concrete (low-level) construals of events enhances the adoption of various self-control strategies and increase the likelihood of pursuing long-terms goals. For example, high-level construals promote a tendency to pre-commit one's future choices, self-punishment for failure to achieve goals and more negative evaluations of temptations.

In the third paper, Mukhopadhyay and Yeung identify consumers' lay theories of self-control as a motivator to increase goal-consistent choices of products for young children. The authors argue that people who believe that self-control is a limited resource that can be increased over time (i.e., limited-malleable theorists) are more interested in products that pursue long term goals. Across four experiments, they demonstrate that those limited-malleable theorists choose more goal-congruent products for their children: taking their children less frequently to fast food restaurants, allowing them fewer unhealthy snacks, and preferring educational to entertaining television programs for them.

Taken together, the three papers provide an overview of factors that increase consumer motivation and have theoretical as well as practical implications for goal research. Data collection in all papers is complete and the session includes a total of 11 studies. All participants have agreed to present should the session be accepted. Each presentation will be for 20 minutes, which will allow 15 minutes for discussion by Michel Pham (the discussion leader) and Q&A at the end of the session.

We expect that this session will be of interest to a broad audience of consumer researchers but of special interest to those researchers interested in issues regarding goals, self-control and motivation. The area of goals is one that has generated considerable interest over the past several years, and we hope that our presentation of recent findings on factors that facilitate goal adherence will result in active debate and generate ideas for future research.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

"Dynamics of Self-Regulation: How (Un)accomplished Goal Actions Affect Motivation"

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People often encourage themselves to work on a goal by considering either their accomplished or their unaccomplished actions. For example, students increase their motivation to study by assessing the amount of time and effort they have already invested on an academic task or by assessing the amount of time and effort required to complete the academic task. Similarly, athletes maintain their motivation to complete a long race by considering either the completed or the remaining distance to the finish line. In addition, social agents, organizations, and educators provide information about accomplished and unaccomplished actions to motivate others to act on a social goal. For example, fundraisers present information about the amount of donations they have received thus far (i.e., seed money) or the amount that is missing to complete a charity campaign goal. Whereas emphasizing accomplished and unaccomplished actions is common, the current research examines when accomplished and unaccomplished actions exert greater effect on motivation. For example, when does information about the amount of money donated thus far versus the amount required to complete a campaign goal increase the likelihood of making a pledge?

We identify two factors that affect motivation: commitment and lack of progress (i.e., discrepancy). We propose that accomplished actions increase motivation by signaling goal commitment (Bem 1972), whereas unaccomplished actions increase motivation by signaling lack of goal progress, which promotes actions that reduce the discrepancy to goal attainment (e.g., Bandura 1991, Carver and Scheier 1981; 1990; Higgins 1987; Locke and Latham, 1990). It follows that accomplished actions motivate congruent choices when goal commitment is ambiguous and relatively low thus when goal commitment is under consideration, whereas unaccomplished actions motivate congruent choices when goal commitment is high and constant thus when the pace of progress on the goal is under consideration. For example, uncommitted students would express greater motivation to study if they considered their accomplished (vs. unaccomplished) academic courses, whereas committed students would express greater motivation to study if they considered their unaccomplished (vs. accomplished) academic courses. We further assume that the focus on accomplished versus unaccomplished actions has similar effects on the pursuit of personal goals (e.g., studying) and contributing to social goals (e.g., charity donations).

Our results across four studies support these hypotheses. By keeping the amount of actual goal progress constant (approximately 50%), we find that the focus on accomplished actions (50% to date) increases the motivation to work on a goal when commitment is

low, but the focus on unaccomplished actions (50% to go) increases the motivation to work on a goal when commitment is high. Specifically, in Study 1, the focus on completed (vs. uncompleted) coursework increased the motivation to study for an elective course but decreased the motivation to study for a core course. In Study 2, the focus on accumulating (vs. remaining) stamps on a frequent-buyer card increased the motivation to use the card toward luxury rewards (e.g., sweatshirts) but decreased the motivation to use the card toward necessity rewards (e.g., textbooks). In Study 3, providing information about the proportion of students who already own (vs. do not yet own) University of Chicago merchandise increased the motivation to purchase these items when the purchase was framed as fulfilling a desire, but it decreased the motivation when the purchase was framed as fulfilling a need. Finally, in Study 4, a field experiment involving an actual fundraising showed that framing seed money in terms of accumulating progress (vs. remaining progress to complete a campaign goal) increased first-time donations but decreased repeated donations by regular donors.

We found further evidence for the underlying inferences that motivate people to act on a goal—namely, either because their commitment is high or because their progress is low. Thus, only uncommitted (but not committed) participants inferred goal commitment on the basis of accomplished actions and therefore were more likely to adhere to the goal (Study 1). In addition, only committed (but not uncommitted) participants expected more goal progress when the focus was on unaccomplished (vs. accomplished) actions, which in turn increased their motivation to adhere to the goal (Study 2). It appears that whether people infer commitment or progress depends on the available information as well as the question they ask (Trope and Liberman 1996), which can refer to their levels of commitment (for uncommitted people) or progress (for committed people).

Taken together, these studies provide convergent evidence that the focus on accomplished actions increases goal adherence by signaling goal commitment when commitment is low and uncertain, whereas the focus on unaccomplished actions increase goal adherence by signaling lack of progress when commitment is high and certain and a person is concerned with the level of goal progress.

"Mental Construals and the Use of Counter-Active Self-Control Strategies"
Kentaro Fujita, Ohio State University

People often fail to do what they want to do, despite possessing the knowledge, opportunity, and skills required. Such self-control failures are pervasive and the focus of a multi-disciplinary research effort. Most models of self-control posit conflicts between automatic versus controlled psychological processes (e.g. Baumeister & Heatherton, 1992), long-term versus short-term motives (e.g. Ainslie & Haslam, 1992; Frederick et al., 2002), or impulsive affect versus rational cognition (e.g. Loewenstein, 1996; Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999).

Recently, Fujita and colleagues (2006) proposed an alternate analysis of self-control based on the tenets of construal level theory (Liberman et al., 2007; Trope & Liberman, 2003). This model posits that people can mentally represent events at multiple levels. High-level construals are mental representations that extract from a class of events those abstract, global, and primary features that are common to and defining of all cases. Low-level construals, in contrast, specify the concrete, local, and secondary features that render one case unique from others. Extensive research has demonstrated the distinction between high- vs. low-level construals and their impact on preferences, decisions, and actions (see Liberman et al., 2007; Trope & Liberman, 2003, for reviews). A construal

level analysis of self-control suggests that self-control conflicts arise when the action implications of high- and low-level construals are in direct opposition. Self-control entails making decisions and acting in accordance with high- vs. low-level construals. The activation of high-level construals should therefore promote self-control. Indeed, research findings have indicated that that high-level construals reduce preferences for immediate over delayed outcomes, promote physical endurance, and strengthen behavioral intentions to engage in activities requiring self-control (Fujita et al., 2006). That is, self-control is promoted when people see the proverbial "forest beyond the trees."

Choosing a behavioral option that reflects greater self-control is only one aspect of the self-control process. People actively shape their social environments, re-structuring decisions to enhance the likelihood of self-control success. People often engage in various strategies pro-actively in anticipation of future self-control conflicts (see Trope & Fishbach, 2005, for review). These strategies are referred to as counteractive self-control strategies, and take numerous forms, such as self-imposing penalties for self-control failures, making rewards contingent on self-control success, and pre-committing one's self to a choice prior to the decision-making opportunity (e.g. Ainslie, 1975; Ariely & Wertenbroch, 2002; Gollwitzer, 1990; Trope & Fishbach, 2000). The initiation of any of these strategies, however, requires one to recognize that there are competing concerns, and that one concern is more primary and central than the other. As such, the utilization of counter-active self-control strategies should be enhanced by the activation of high-level construals.

Study 1 examined pre-committing of one's future choices as a function of construal. Research has indicated that when people pre-commit future choices, they are more likely to make choices that are consistent with greater self-control (Read, Loewenstein, & Kalayaram, 1999). Participants generated superordinate (high-level) ends achieved by vs. subordinate (low-level) means to achieve good physical health (Freitas et al., 2004; Fujita et al., 2006). They were then told of an opportunity to participate in a future study that required attending multiple experimental sessions. They were also told that they would be provided with a snack at each session. After viewing the snack options, which included healthy and unhealthy choices, participants were asked to indicate whether they would prefer to pre-commit to all of their snack choices in advance, or decide on a session-by-session basis. As predicted, those induced to construe events at high-level construals had preferred to pre-commit their future choices. Importantly, as predicted, this effect of construals was specific to those for whom the choice between healthy vs. healthy represented a meaningful self-control conflict–i.e., those who on a follow-up measure indicated that health goals were valuable and important to them. This specific pattern of results suggests that the results indeed are attributable to strategic, goal-directed adoption of pre-commitment as a function of construals.

Research by Trope & Fishbach (2000) suggests that people strategically self-impose punishments for failures in anticipation of future self-control conflicts. Study 2 examined whether high- vs. low-level construals would promote this tendency. Participants engaged in a task entailing superordinate (high-level) vs. subordinate (low-level) categorization of objects (Lin, Murphy, & Schoben, 1997). They were then told about an opportunity to participate in a future study that would provide diagnostic personality feedback but would require waking up at 2 a.m. in the morning. Participants were asked to indicate how much they would be willing to pay as a cancellation fee if they failed to appear at the appointed hour. As predicted, those induced to high-level construals imposed higher

penalties for self-control failures. As with Study 1, this effect was specific to those for whom the study opportunity represented a meaningful self-control conflict- i.e., those who on a follow-up measure indicated that they thought the feedback would be valuable and important.

Whereas Studies 1 and 2 examined changes to the external features of future choices, Study 3 examined strategies designed to change the subjective perception of future choices. Research has suggested that people prospectively de-value future temptations to promote self-control (Trope & Fishbach, 2005). Study 3 examined whether high-level construals would promote the use of this strategy. To manipulate construal levels, participants either generated category labels (high-level construals) or exemplars (low-level construals) for a series of common objects (Fujita et al., 2006). Participants, who were all students, were then asked to evaluate a list of words, some of which were temptations that undermine the goal to study. More negative evaluations of these temptation words would represent counter-active self-control. As expected, high levels of construal led to less positive evaluations of temptations (with no differences between levels on non-temptation words). Moreover, as in Studies 2 & 3, the effect was limited to those who experienced those temptations as meaningful self-control conflicts, i.e. those who reported study goals as important and valuable. Taken all together, these three studies indicate that high-level construals promote strategic re-structuring of both external and psychological features of future decisions.

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Overview

The process of consumerization of young children is a relatively recent phenomenon, yet it is ubiquitous today. Given the extent of attention that marketers pay to young children, what role do parents and other concerned adults play in the interactions between marketers and children? Parents could act as strict gatekeepers regulating all consumption; alternately, they could follow a laissez-faire policy if that were more in line with their beliefs. Advocates have recommended that parents regulate television, restrict junk food intake, and control consumption choices in general so that children do not develop unhealthy habits. However, such recommendations recognize that parents need to "walk the talk", e.g., by watching less television themselves if that is what they seek to regulate. Indeed, family influences on the socialization of children as consumers may permeate more through processes of "subtle social interaction" than purposive educational efforts by parents (John 1999). People transfer values through products (McCracken 1986) and the product choices that parents make for their children are critical in fostering beliefs and values.

This research explores an under-researched mechanism via which the beliefs that adults hold influence the choices they make for young children. Specifically, we investigate how people's lay theories of self-control—their beliefs about the nature of self-control in general— influence their choices. Across four experiments, conducted in the laboratory and with parents intercepted in the field, we find that individuals who believe that reserves of self-control are limited yet augmentable are more likely to try and "teach" children to increase their self-control: by giving gifts that delay gratification or round out perceived shortcomings in character, by restricting the allowance of unhealthy foods, and by preferring educational to entertaining television programs for them.

Theory

Lay theories, or "what ordinary men and women believe about the existence and power of individual differences in personality" have been shown to affect judgments and behavior in several domains (Ross and Nisbett 1991). Mukhopadhyay and Johar (2005) identified lay theories of self-control that varied on two orthogonal dimensions–(1) limited/unlimited, or the extent to which people believe that people in general have small vs. large stores of self-control; and (2) fixed/malleable, or the extent to which they believe these stores may be augmented over time. These lay theories are relevant in the current context because differences in beliefs about the nature of self-control may prompt differing inclinations towards trying to build a child's character. For instance, a limited-malleable theorist, namely, someone who believes that people have small reserves of self-control that may be increased over time, is likely to recognize that the amount of self-control available may not be enough to accommodate all demands, so there is a need to increase the reserves of self-control. This belief, together with the belief that self-control reserves can actually be increased, may motivate them to carry out actions that help improve self-control capability. By the same token, this person would also believe that it is worth trying to teach children to increase their self-control.

In contrast, unlimited-malleable theorists believe that people in general have very large reserves of self-control. In this worldview, people generally do not have problems of self-control, and therefore are unlikely to initiate practices that facilitate children's learning of self-control. An additional consideration arises when they are faced with options that can deliver instant gratification. To the extent that value is discounted with temporal distance, unlimited-malleable theorists may prefer products that deliver instant gratification rather than those that build self-control by delivering long-term value. Such products, that deliver instant rather than delayed gratification, are known as "relative vices" (Wertenbroch 1998), e.g., tasty but unhealthy foods, and entertainment programs such as cartoons.

Finally, fixed theorists believe that reserves of self-control can not be increased over time. Hence, in their worldview, the question of teaching children to increase their self-control should be irrelevant. Therefore, regardless of whether they hold a limited or unlimited theory, fixed theorists should be indifferent between virtues and vices when deciding for young children.

Findings

These propositions were supported across four experiments. Experiment 1 found that parents' lay theories influenced their choices of food products—such as snacks and fast food—that are related to children's self-control. Parents who were limited-malleable theorists executed tighter control over their children's consumption of fast food and were less likely to appease them with unhealthy snacks, as compared with unlimited-malleable parents. As for fixed theorists, the frequency of visiting fast food restaurants and the likelihood of providing quickie snacks did not differ as a function of whether they believed that self-control is limited or unlimited.

Experiments 2 and 3 then showed that lay theories also influence people's tendencies to gift children products that develop self-control and build character. In experiment 2, limited-malleable (vs. unlimited-malleable) theorists were more likely to choose a gift that delivers greater long-term than short-term value. Fixed theorists did not differ in their choices of products that varied on this dimension. In experiment 3, limited-malleable theorists were more likely to choose a gift that can develop the child in a manner that is complementary to the child's current character. That is, they

preferred to gift an educational game to a child described as cheerful and happy, but an entertainment game to a child described as bright and intelligent.

Finally, experiment 4 demonstrated the same pattern of effects in parents' choices of television programs, and reversed the effect using a simple salience manipulation (cf. Mukhopadhyay and Johar 2005) that changed parents' expectancies about their children's self-control.

The convergent patterns observed across experiments, across the domains of gift-giving, television program preferences, and eating allowances, and in the lab with student participants as well as outside with real parents, provide strong support for our basic hypothesis. Other psychological and demographic variables did not explain these patterns systematically, and controlling for these factors did not affect the basic pattern of results. These results show that the actions of parents and other elders may implicitly influence how children develop, driven purely by beliefs such as lay theories that the adult holds, independent of any explicit motives.