Background Goals in the Foreground: the Overriding Effect of Nonconscious Goals on Consumer Choice

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We investigate whether a background or nonconscious goal can override a simultaneously active focal or conscious goal and alter choice under the guise of a taste test. When participants are only given a focal goal of taste, the majority of them choose the alternative that contains the pure contents of an existing market product. However, when the goal of being healthy is nonconsciously activated, the majority of the participants choose an inferior alternative whose label implies health. Contrary to their behavior, virtually all of the participants who were primed with a background goal give reasons for their choice that are consistent to their focal goal.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Goal systems theory defines goals as mental representations that are interconnected with their means of attainment and with alternative goals. Depending on their access to conscious awareness, goals can be identified as either focal goals or background goals. Focal goals refer to goals that one is consciously and deliberately pursuing, while background goals are those whose presence one is not consciously aware of (Kruglanski, Shah, Fishbach, Friedman, Chun, and Sleeth-Keppler 2002). Thus far, the research on background goals has been mainly pursued under the context of multifinality, which refers to the notion of a single means of attainment satisfying multiple goals. According to this principle, background goals are thought to influence choice only when the focal goal is satisfied. For example, in one study, individuals were asked to choose the more durable fabric patch (focal goal) between two alternatives that varied in color but were, in fact, identical in terms of quality. Choice was dependent on whether the fabric patch matched participants’ school color (background goal) as opposed to mere chance. This result, however, was contingent on the fact that both patches were equally durable (Chun and Kruglanski 2005).

The present study investigates whether a background goal can affect choice in a situation where the focal goal is not equally satisfied by the alternatives available. We present participants with a binary choice set where the inferior alternative is in favor of a background goal. When a nonconscious, background goal is primed, we argue that it can override a concurrent focal goal such that the majority of participants choose this alternative. The growing literature on nonconscious goal pursuit offers ground for this possibility (e.g., Bargh 1990; Bargh and Chartrand 1999). Of importance, from a focal goal perspective, the predicted choice behavior of participants is suboptimal in that the unchosen alternative satisfies their focal goal better. This would imply that the effect of background goals is not always conditional on the successful attainment of the focal goal, as the multifinality principle of goal systems theory suggests.

Although we predicted participants would show behavior consistent with their background goal, we nevertheless expected their reasons for choice would be based on their focal goal. This is because background goals are, by definition, nonconscious, and thus individuals will not likely be aware of their influence. Similar reports have been made in previous research (e.g., Nisbett and Wilson 1977). Recent studies with split-brain patients have also shown that the dissociation between actual behavior and its causal interpretation can be traced to different hemispheres, with the left hemisphere possessing a unique capacity to interpret behavior elicited by a disconnected right hemisphere (Gazzaniga 1995).

Ninety-four undergraduate students from a Korean university were recruited to participate in our study in exchange for partial course credit. They participated in three disguised studies, the first being a priming task where they were randomly assigned to either an experimental condition, for which a background goal was induced, or a control condition where there was no background goal. Participants were given a 15-item version of the scrambled sentence test (Chartrand and Bargh 1996) where each of the 15 items contained a health-related word (e.g., health, physique, strong, vitality) in the experimental condition. In the control condition, these words were replaced with 15 different words unrelated to health (e.g., blue, intelligence, dinner). All participants were then given a 5-minute filler task in which they had to solve a set of math problems that consisted of three simple questions. The purpose of this delay was based on past research which has shown that priming effects for motivational constructs should persist after a brief period of time, whereas those for perceptual constructs are likely to fade away (Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, and Trötschel 2001). After the filler task, participants were given a final choice task where they had to choose between two different versions of iced tea. In line with the cover story that this was a taste test for a local beverage company, the experimenter explicitly gave participants a focal goal of “choosing the better tasting drink.” Unbeknownst to the participants, one of the drinks contained 100mL of an existing market product, while the other contained 95mL of the same product and 5mL of drinking water. The two samples were labeled differently with the latter drink signaling “health.” The labels were pretested in terms of their attractiveness with fifty students from the same population as those in the main experiment. Individuals showed no significant difference in their attitudes toward the two labels. A subgroup of these individuals was also given a blind taste test where preference for the taste of the pure iced tea was confirmed.

Results of a chi-square test revealed that the drink choice of participants was significantly different between the control and the experimental conditions. In the absence of a background goal, the majority of participants (59.1 percent) chose the pure iced tea over the diluted version. In the experimental condition where participants were induced with a background goal of being healthy, the choice pattern reversed with the majority (62 percent) choosing the diluted iced tea despite an explicit reminder to choose the better tasting alternative. In line with our prediction, participants in both the experimental and the control conditions gave “taste” as their reason for choice. Responses in the experimental condition included those that described the diluted iced tea as having a “milder taste,” “sweeter flavor” and “refreshing finish,” suggesting that the influence of the background goal was indeed beyond the conscious awareness of our participants.

The results of our study can be generalized to more real-life scenarios, where in many cases consumers consciously intend to focus on the performance of a product but nevertheless purchase products that in fact are inefficient along that dimension. We argue their purchases are often driven by background goals whose presence goes undetected by the consumer. An important avenue for future research is to identify the specific conditions that give rise to the dominance of a background goal and a focal goal respectively.

References
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