Getting Begets Wanting: a New Theory About Long-Term Changes in Strength of Motivation

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Prior theories of motivation, based on the satiation cycle, propose that satisfaction reduces subsequent motivational drive. A new theory proposes that this occurs only in the short-run, and that motivation conforms to a “getting begets wanting” pattern in the long-run. In three studies, we demonstrate that “getting” (that is, engaging in a motivational endeavor) strengthens later motivation in that domain. We tested this theory in the contexts of crossword puzzles, handheld video games, napping, and news-related behaviors, and found that engaging in an activity increased motivation to engage in it subsequently.

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This hypothesis was tested in two laboratory experiments. Both experiments used a 2 (regulatory focus: between-subjects) x 2 (anchor value: high vs. low; within-subjects) mixed design. In both experiments, participants were first primed with either promotion or prevention focus (using the priming procedure in Lockwood, Jordan, and Kunda 2002) and then made numerical judgments with either high or low anchor values. The data provided strong support for our hypothesis. The data revealed a significant regulatory focus x anchor value interaction such that answers from participants who were primed with prevention focus (vis-à-vis those primed with promotion focus) were closer to their anchor values, indicating greater anchoring effect. Moreover, in study 2, after numerical judgments, participants were also asked to list the thoughts that went through their minds as they were making the numerical judgments. These verbal protocols were coded as consistent, inconsistent, or irrelevant to anchor values. As expected, prevention-primed participants listed proportionally more anchor-consistent thoughts than did promotion-primed participants. A mediation analysis confirmed that the effect of regulatory focus was mediated by the relative proportion of anchor-consistent vs. anchor-inconsistent thoughts in the verbal protocols.

These results suggest that the effectiveness of anchoring-inspired marketing practices (e.g., displaying MSRP) is likely to vary depending on the regulatory focus of the customer. This research contributes to the growing literature on anchoring bias and regulatory focus. In particular, it offers interesting insights regarding the effects of regulatory focus on consumers’ information processing strategies. It also holds important implications for cross-cultural marketing since Asian cultures are generally more prevention-focused than their western counterparts (e.g., American).

References

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Standard theories of motivation propose that satisfaction reduces subsequent motivational drive (Hull 1943; Spence 1956). These theories of motivation are based on the satiation cycle, which presumes a standard pattern of motivation, such that people have desires, pursue satiation of those desires, and when they are able to satiate those desires, their motivational strength for those desires is reduced. Although we agree with this account of motivation for desires in the short run, we contend that a new model better accounts for changes in motivational strength over the long run. Rather than extinguishing subsequent wanting, the effect of satiating a desire may trigger a stronger and longer-lasting wanting for a stimulus. This new theory of long-term changes in motivation is entitled “getting begets wanting” and three experiments were conducted to test it. In sum, the getting begets wanting theory predicts that satiation of desires will lead to a long term increase in motivational strength for an object.

We conducted three studies to test getting begets wanting. Our goal across these studies was to expose or increase exposure to an object or event, and then to test for changes in motivation to experience that object or event after some period of time.

In experiment 1, participants were randomly assigned to take home either a crossword puzzle book containing puzzles ranging in difficulty or a hand-held electronic Solitaire game (a control group served as a baseline for comparison and completed only pre- and post-experimental tasks). Participants in the two experimental conditions were asked to complete crossword puzzles or play their game for 20 minutes each day, and to complete questionnaires about their mood (before and after the activity), their success at the activity, and amount of time spent thinking about the activity. Results indicated that participants in the experimental conditions enjoyed their activities (crossword puzzle or video game) more, thought about them more, and felt more successful than did control-condition participants.