An Investigation Into Individual's Repeated Attempts At Behavior Change

Courtney Droms, Valdosta State University, USA

Recent research has shown that individuals make repeated attempts at behavior change prior to actually being successful. Many of the dark side of consumer behavior areas, such as smoking, drug use, shopping, and gambling, are behaviors that individuals try to change on a repeated basis. As consumer researchers, however, we do not have a clear understanding of how people interpret behavior change failures and persist in their efforts to change their behaviors after such failures. This research examines how individuals change their eating behaviors. A national panel of adults is surveyed at two points in time. The public policy and consumer behavior implications of the results are discussed.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15090/volumes/v37/NA-37

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com.
EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Recent research has shown that individuals make repeated attempts at behavior change prior to actually being successful. For example, typically individuals try to change their dieting behaviors on 4 to 5 occasions prior to actually being successful (Polivy and Herman 2002). Many of the dark side of consumer behavior areas identified by Mick (1996), such as smoking, drug use, shopping, and gambling, are behaviors that individuals try to change on a repeated basis. As consumer researchers, however, we do not have a clear understanding of how people interpret behavior change failures and persist in their efforts to change their behaviors after such failures. In an effort to understand these behavior change attempts, this research replicates and extends the Theory of Trying (Bagozzi and Warshaw 1990), to include feedback loops from the outcomes of behavior change attempts to attitudes towards trying to change again.

Theoretical Model
The theoretical model is based on the model developed in the Theory of Trying (Bagozzi and Warshaw 1990). The theory of trying is employed in this context because it includes two variables that seem very relevant to repeated attempts at changing behaviors (i.e. the frequency and recency of prior attempts at changing behaviors). However, the model proposed by Bagozzi and Warshaw (1990) ends at trying to change behaviors. While the author does suggest that the outcomes of these behavior change attempts feedback into attitudes, they do not explore the nature of the feedback. In order to explore the nature of the feedback from outcomes to attitudes, this paper employs three constructs–attributions for outcomes, self-esteem, and hope. Each of these factors will now be briefly discussed.

Weiner’s (1974) theory of attributions posits that there are three dimensions to attributions–locus, stability, and controllability–that assist individuals in understanding the causes of their behaviors and behavioral outcomes. In the model, specific hypotheses, consistent with prior literature on attributions and the self-serving bias, have been developed that explicate how outcomes for success and failure are attributed along each dimension. These attributions also act as input to attitudes towards trying again and as such, hypotheses have been developed to examine several combinations of dimensions that will have the most impact on attitudes.

Self-esteem is defined as in individual’s subjective appraisal of him or herself (Sedikides and Gregg 2003), which can be influenced by both goal achievement and goal failure (Crocker et al. 2003). As such, individuals in this study are expected to have lower levels of self-esteem post-failure rather than post-success at trying to change behaviors. Hypotheses were also developed and tested to capture the complexity of the interplay between self-esteem and attributions. Finally, an individual’s self-esteem is also hypothesized to have a direct effect on that individual’s attitudes towards trying to change in the future.

MacInnis and de Mello (2005) define hope as a positive emotion attached to a goal. There are three important dimensions to hope: goal congruency (i.e. the extent to which an environment is conducive to fulfilling a specific goal), certainty (i.e. the level of confidence an individual has in being able to achieve his or her goal), and importance of the goal. All three of these dimensions should be affected by the individual’s success or failure at trying to change behaviors, such that failure at trying to change behaviors should lower an individual’s level of hope. Hope is also hypothesized to affect the ways in which individuals understand and attribute the causes of their behavior change outcomes. Finally, individuals with high levels of hope should have a more positive outlook on the possibilities present in the future, which should enable them to have more positive attitudes towards changing in the future.

Methodology
An internet survey of 363 people from across the United States who are currently trying to diet was completed. Modifying the procedure employed by Bagozzi and Warshaw (1990), data was collected in two stages, one month apart. Participants were asked to complete a series of measures in the first stage designed to capture their attitudes and intentions to try, the frequency and recency of prior attempts at trying to change behavior, and their current levels of self-esteem and hope. At stage two, one month later, individuals completed a second survey including measures of trying, the outcome of trying, and attitudes towards trying again in the future. Participants will also complete measures capturing their attributions for the outcome of their attempts at behavior change, as well as their updated levels of self-esteem and hope.

Results and Discussion
Overall, this research enlightens the discussion of how people repeatedly change their health behaviors. The results indicate that individuals attribute the cause of their success or failure at their most recent behavior change attempt in such a way that it enables them to have a more positive attitude towards trying to change again in the future. The results from structural equation modeling show that the participants in this study attributed their failure to achieve their behavior change goal to causes that were unstable and controllable which resulted in both the stability and controllability dimensions of attributions having a significant positive effect on their attitudes towards trying again in the future. In addition, the results show that the individual’s attributions mediate the effect that hope has on their attitude towards changing in the future. Moreover, I find that attributions moderate the effect that the outcome of their behavior change attempt has on the individual’s level of self-esteem.

There are important implications for both marketing and public policy as a result of this study.

References


