When Flippers Flop: Goal Reversion in Consumer Choice

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We use consumers currently preferred option to infer which goal is currently most active in choices involving competing goals. Since goals increase in activation when they are inhibited, consumers who switch leaders (supplanting one goal with another) should revert to their initial leader/goal more often than is normative. Data from three experiments support this goal reversion hypothesis. The first finds reversion to a goal to eat tasty food. The second finds reversion to both healthy and tasty goals (away from tasty and healthy goals, respectively). The second experiment also finds that consumers low in Need for Decisiveness exhibit more goal reversion. The final experiment reveals that those for whom the initial goal is highly important are most likely to revert.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Imagine choosing between two restaurants (A and B), one which has tastier food and one which has healthier food. Suppose you first learn that Restaurant A has very decadent food, which is good because it fits one of your goals—to have a delicious meal. Next, you learn that Restaurant B uses fresh, local ingredients, which fits another of your goals—to eat healthfully. Though you were leaning towards Restaurant A originally, this new information causes you to switch your preference to Restaurant B (i.e., you flip from A to B). Suppose you then encounter additional neutral information about the two restaurants. How does your prior decision process, particularly the inhibition of the initial goal, influence your final restaurant choice?

We argue that because the two choice options align with different goals (to eat tasty food and to eat healthy), a consumer’s restaurant preference at any point during the choice process can be used to infer which goal is more active at that point. Further, when a consumer switches preference from one option to another (as in the example above), he must inhibit one goal to pursue the other. This inhibition of the original goal should cause it to increase in activation (Atkinson and Birch 1970; Bargh et al. 2001). Therefore, we predict that when a consumer inhibits one goal to pursue another (by switching his preference from A to B), the original goal should increase in activation, leading the individual to be more likely to switch back to the original option when given the opportunity (i.e., upon encountering additional information). We refer to this as the goal reversion hypothesis. In this paper we report findings from three experiments designed to test this hypothesis.

Participants in experiment 1 chose between two unfamiliar restaurants based on four attributes that they read in sequence. The initial two attributes revealed that one of the restaurants had food that was more decadent and tasty. The third attribute revealed that the other restaurant had food that was healthier. We expected that this ordering of the information would establish the more decadent restaurant as preferred after the first two attributes, and that many participants would switch to the healthier restaurant after reading the third attribute (to pursue the competing goal). This subset of participants constitutes our focal sample, because these participants have inhibited one goal in pursuit of another. Our main interest is what happens to preferences of participants in the focal sample upon reading an additional attribute that is uncorrelated with tastiness or healthiness of the food. The goal reversion hypothesis predicts that a greater proportion of subjects should be expected to flop back to the more decadent option than would be normatively expected. Our results support this hypothesis. Forty-six percent of participants in the focal sample reverted back to the initial choice option after viewing the final attribute. This proportion was significantly greater than predicted by normative standards ($\chi^2=6.47$, $p<.01$).

Experiment 2 attempts to replicate the findings from experiment 1, and to examine whether those for whom the goal to eat tasty is most important are most likely to revert. Goal reversion is also observed in this experiment, and reversion is most prevalent among those who place the greatest importance on the goal to eat tasty food. As expected, this indicates that self impeding an important goal causes greater activation than self impeding a less important goal.

The third and final experiment examines whether goal reversion is symmetric for different goal types. In addition, the experiment examines Need for Decisiveness as a possible moderator of the effect. Participants again read four attributes about two restaurants. Based on the ordering of the information, half the participants were led to favor the healthy option first, while the other half were led to favor the tasty option. Reversion rates for both groups were significantly higher than that predicted by normative standards (both $p<.01$). In addition, participants who started with a taste goal were marginally more likely to revert to the original goal than those who started with a health goal. This result fits with the idea that the goal to eat tasty is more desirable and so is more goal-like than the goal to eat healthy. An examination of various individual difference measures revealed that reversion is not a function of self-control or preference for consistency, but is related to an individual’s Need for Decisiveness. Specifically, those high in Need for Decisiveness are less likely to exhibit goal reversion.

These findings provide support for the goal reversion hypothesis, and increase our understanding of the role goals play in the earliest stages of preference construction. In addition, our methodology illustrates a new technique for tracking which goal is most active at any point of a choice process. Specifically, we examine which option is leading in a choice process with competing goals and use these preferences to infer which goal is active at a particular time. The advantage of this procedure is that it can be used to study the effects of self-inhibition of goals and how consumers switch between goals during a choice process with minimal interference of the choice process itself. Our findings highlight the importance of understanding order effects and preference reversals during choice processes and suggest that managers may want to consider the timing of information that could help an initial goal re-emerge.

REFERENCES
