Commitment to Virtuous Behaviors: How Self-Control Shapes Commitment to Near Vs. Distant Behaviors
Danit Ein-Gar, Tel-Aviv University, Israel

Across five studies, time execution and self-control are shown to influence commitment to virtuous behaviors. Low self-control consumers prefer committing to the distant future when one’s schedule is abstract. High self-control consumers prefer committing to the near future when one’s schedule is concrete. The effect is mediated by time slack.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Virtuous behaviors are behaviors that people believe they ought to do, but might find them difficult (Ein-Gar, Goldenberg, & Sagiv, 2013; Read, Loewenstein, & Kalyanaraman, 1999). Understanding the effectiveness of requests to commit to virtuous behaviors is important theoretically and practically.

Past research suggests that activation of distant future mindset should encourage individuals to be more self-controlled, goal-driven in their behavior (e.g. Dhar & Kim, 2007; Fujita et al., 2006). Furthermore, research on choice between “should” and “want” shows that when the execution of the choice is in the distant future, people make more “should” (i.e., virtuous) choices than when execution of the choice is in the near future (Milkman, Rogers, & Bazerman, 2010; Rogers & Bazerman, 2008).

This research suggests that contrary to past findings, consumers may be less likely to commit to a distant- (as opposed to a near-) virtuous behavior.

Temporal-construal-theory has laid the notion that distant future is construed more abstract while the near future is construed more concrete (Liberman, Sagristano & Trope 2002; Trope & Liberman, 2003). In line with this notion, in the distant future, one’s schedule is construed abstractly, while in the near future, one’s schedule is construed more concrete.

Research on information processing suggests that abstract information makes people more optimistic regarding the outcome of their actions (Chan, Sengupta & Mukhopadhyay 2013). Thus, when individuals’ schedule is abstract, they might optimistically believe they will find spare time for a given action, and hence be more likely to commit to it. Conversely, research has shown that concrete information provides more confidence of prediction (Camerer & Weber, 1992). Thus, when individuals’ schedules are concrete, they may be more certain of finding the necessary time to carry out the action, and hence might be more likely to commit.

This paper offers to reconcile these seemingly contradicting hypotheses by suggesting that commitment preference is dependent on one’s level of self-control.

It is argued that low self-control consumers prefer committing to the distant future, not only because they are more likely to procrastinate, but also because in the future time is vague and this vagueness makes them feel more confident they will find the time to complete their commitment. High self-control consumers prefer committing to the near future hand, not only because they want to “check things off their list” but also because the near future is concrete and this gives them a sense of certainty that they will be able to identify the necessary spare time.

Study 1: Demonstrated the effect for commitment to pro-environmental behavior. Student participants (n=60, M_ages=24) completed a self-control scale (DSC; α =.85; Ein-Gar et al., 2013; Ein-Gar & Steinhardt, 2011), a filler task and then read about consumption of green products. Next, participants reported their willingness to hand out flyers encouraging consumption of green products, either the next semester (near-condition) or the next summer vacation (distant-condition). As expected low self-control participants were more willing to hand out flyers in the distant-future while high self-control participants showed greater preference in the near future (F_{(1,57)}=10.11, p<.02).

Study 2: Tested the effect for pro-social behavior, when self-control is manipulated rather than measured. Adult participants (n=122, M Ages=28) were asked to recall an event in which they had overcome temptations, (high self-control condition) or had yielded to their temptations (low self-control condition). Next, participants read about a pro-bono project in which volunteers spend time with underprivileged children. The project was expected to take place either next month (near-condition) or in 6 months (distant-condition). Participants were asked to indicate the number of hours they would be willing to volunteer. Low self-control participants volunteered more hours in the distant-future. High self-control participants volunteered more hours in the near-future (F_{(1,10)}=14.08, p<.01).

Study 3: Unravels the underlying effect of time availability certainty while testing commitment to a behavior with a personal benefit. Adult participants (n=386, Mage=32) completed the DSC scale (α =.90) and were then offered to join a 10-session coaching program for attaining a financially goal either in two weeks (near condition) or four months (distant condition). Participants were asked to indicate their intention to commit to a 10-meeting program and to indicate how certain there are they would find the necessary time to uphold their commitment. Low-self-control participants were more willing to commit in the near-condition while high-self-control participants reported greater commitment intentions in the distant-condition (F_{(1,382)}=9.95, p < .01). Moderated mediation analyses showed that commitment was positively mediated by time availability certainty for low self-control participants (95% CI: 0.014 to 0.419) and was negatively mediated for high self-control participants (95% CI: -0.488 to -.02).

REFERENCES


