It’S Just Too Easy: How Planning Affects Perceived Effort, Goal Value, and Motivation

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Planning to achieve a goal can have beneficial and detrimental effects on people’s goal-directed motivation. We examine situations when planning leads to an increased versus a decreased perception of effort associated with goal pursuit. We show that when planning increases perceptions of effort, motivation to pursue the goal often increases.

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From Eating Healthy to Planned Purchases: Insights into the Interplay Effect of Goals and Planning on Consumer Welfare
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Paper #1: Saying “No” to Cake or “Yes” to Kale: Plans to Exclude or Include Foods to Reach Health Goals
Meredith David, Baylor University, USA
Kelly Haws, Vanderbilt University, USA

Paper #2: It’s Just Too Easy: How Planning Affects Perceived Effort, Goal Value, and Motivation
Julia Bayuk, University of Delaware, USA
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Paper #3: Planned but Not Purchased? A Field Study of Drivers and Consequences of Failed Purchases
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Paper #4: A Metacognitive Perspective on the Motivational Benefits of Planning Across Domains
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Leona Tam, University of Wollongong, Australia

SESSION OVERVIEW
Planning has been argued to be beneficial for improving consumer welfare, ensuring people are more motivated to pursue their goals such as exercising more and saving more money (Lusardi and Mitchell 2007; Sniehotta et al. 2005). Prior research has investigated how goal characteristics and planning interact to influences motivation and goal pursuit (Bagozzi and Dholakia 1999). For instance, Early and Perry (1987) found that people given specific challenges set goals do more task planning than those without such goals. Townsend and Liu (2012) showed that planning can backfire and lessen self-control when consumers are far away from achieving their goals.

The proposed session brings together four papers that provide new insights into the interplay effects of goals and planning on consumer welfare. The opening paper by David and Haws investigates how the “inclusion” plans focusing on goal-consistent behavior (e.g., eating healthy food) differ from the exclusion plans focusing on goal-inconsistent behavior (e.g., avoiding unhealthy foods) in influencing healthy eating. They find that high-control consumers are more likely to develop and benefit from inclusion plans. Although low-control consumers tend to develop exclusion plans, they select more healthy foods when they have inclusion plans.

Second, Bayuk and Laran examine how planning interacts with goal difficulty to influence consumer motivation to live healthier. They show that planning makes the pursuit of easy goals even easier, whereas low self-control individuals report higher commitment to goal pursuit have been examined (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991), a fundamental distinction that deserves further attention is whether the pursuit plans focus on acceptable (a positive focus) or unacceptable (a negative focus) behaviors. As such, we examine the adoption and use of “inclusion” versus “exclusion” plans with respect to eating behaviors. Fundamentally, focusing on what one should do versus should not do is quite different psychologically, and likely leads to differential effectiveness, yet advice abounds regarding “the best foods for your health” or “foods you should never eat.” To better understand the effectiveness of these systematically different types of plans, we focus on differences based upon individuals’ propensities for self-control (Hofmann et al. 2012).

We advance novel contributions by integrating important considerations for inclusion or exclusion-focused self-control strategies based on individual differences in self-control (measured by the Tangney et al. 2004 GSC scale in all three studies). First, we predict and find that high self-control individuals tend to establish plans that encourage goal-consistent behavior (inclusion strategies), focusing on what they should do; whereas, low self-control individuals more naturally use plans that attempt to discourage goal-inconsistent behavior (exclusion strategies), instead focusing on what they should not do, likely making it even harder to resist. Second, for high self-control individuals, inclusion plans foster greater commitment. Third, although low self-control individuals report higher commitment to exclusion plans, these individuals make more healthy choices when they have inclusion plans. Overall, the findings suggest inclusion-based plans are more effective, and yet these are uncommon for those who struggle the most to maintain control.

In study 1, participants were prompted to list specific rules they use to guide their food consumption. Participants then evaluated 23 specific strategies created by the authors from online sources providing healthy-eating guidelines. Participants indicated how often they used each strategy. The open-ended rules were coded for inclusion versus exclusion plans. We found that lower self-control individuals were more likely to use exclusion plans than were those high in self-control, who instead showed a propensity to use inclusion plans. Responses to the list of provided strategies revealed that the use of ex-
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cclusion plans was strongly associated with lower self-control, while the use of inclusion plans was more strongly associated with higher self-control. As such, study 1 establishes important fundamental differences in the inclusion versus exclusion nature of plans developed by those higher or lower in self-control.

Study 2 was a longitudinal study designed to assess commitment to goals following development of inclusion versus exclusion plans. Participants were exposed to one of three experimental conditions: inclusion plans (i.e., focusing on foods that should be eaten), exclusion plans (i.e., focusing on foods that should not be eaten), and a control condition (no plan). After three weeks, participants indicated how committed they were to meeting their goal. The results reveal that, low (high) self-control individuals with exclusion plans were more (less) committed than those with inclusion plans. In addition, in the inclusion condition, high self-control individuals were more committed than those low in self-control; whereas, in the exclusion condition, commitment did not differ as a function of individual-level self-control. We also found that, among low self-control individuals, inclusion plans may have the same effect as having no strategy; whereas, among high self-control individuals, exclusion plans operate in a manner similar to having no specific strategy. We next examine the impact on plan development, liking of foods planned to be included or excluded, and subsequent food choices.

Study 3 asked participants to imagine that they were pursuing a health related goal. We manipulated pursuit strategies using the same procedure as in study 2. To ascertain how effective participants’ were in developing lists that would be motivating, participants were later presented with the specific items that they had listed and were asked to indicate how much they liked each item. After several unrelated tasks, participants were presented with a list of 16 hypothetical snack choices (8 healthy and 8 unhealthy; Laran 2009) that they could receive for their participation and were asked to indicate their top five choices. The results reveal that low self-control individuals listed more food items in the exclusion condition, whereas high self-control individuals listed more items in the inclusion condition. Interestingly, high self-control individuals who were in the inclusion condition liked their listed items more than those who were in the exclusion condition, showing a tendency to focus on favored items to approach. In addition, in the exclusion condition, low self-control individuals report higher liking of their listed items than high self-control individuals, showing that they were focusing on items that were very attractive to them, likely increasing the difficulty of resisting them. We also found that low self-control individuals selected a higher number of healthy items in the inclusion condition than in the control condition. Thus, although low self-control individuals tended to focus on foods they really liked but that should not be eaten, these individuals could enhance their progress by focusing instead on foods that they should eat.

Our research advances new insights into the application of self-control strategies, specifically those involving inclusion or exclusion plans. We demonstrate that individuals higher in self-control utilize more positive (inclusion-related) plans. In addition, we provide evidence suggesting that, through the use of inclusion-related plans, individuals lower in self-control may be able to enhance their goal-related performance.

It’s Just Too Easy: How Planning Affects Perceived Effort, Goal Value, and Motivation

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Most existing research that examines at the impact of forming plans on goal pursuit suggests that plans are helpful (e.g., Gollwitzer and Sheeran 2006). Yet, recent research examining goals such as losing weight and saving money suggests that plans are not universally beneficial. For instance, Townsend and Liu (2012) find that those in poor standing actually exhibit less self-control when they form plans versus when they do not. Buehler and Griffin (2003) and Spiller and Lynch (2010) examine holiday shopping behavior and find that both (1) increased propensity to plan for the future and (2) forming detailed time plans are associated with greater planning fallacy. Bayuk et al. (2010) show that planners are less likely to consider alternative means to attain the same goal versus non-planners. These findings suggest that plans benefit consumers in their goal pursuits in some situations but not in others.

We propose that the difficulty of the goal moderates the beneficial effects of planning. Forming a plan increases the salience of the actions that need to be taken to achieve the goal. Since people tend to value things that require effort, to a certain point (Brehm and Wright 1989; Labroo and Kim 2009), we suggest that planning influences perceptions of effort and motivation differently depending on the level of goal difficulty. We show that when planning makes the necessary behaviors seem less effortful, motivation to pursue the goal decreases. When planning makes the necessary behaviors seem more effortful, motivation to pursue the goal increases.

Specifically, we propose that when the goal is relatively easy, planning should lead people to feel that the necessary actions require minimal effort. Thus, planners (vs. non-planners) should be less motivated to pursue the goal or engage in goal-consistent behaviors. When the goal is of moderate difficulty, planning should lead people to feel that the necessary actions are effortful. Based on our conceptualization, planners (vs. non-planners) should be more motivated to pursue the goal. Lastly, when the goal is of extreme difficulty, planning should lead people to feel that the necessary actions are tremendously effortful, but that this feeling is also present for people who think about the goal but don’t form a plan. Therefore, both planners and non-planners should be, overall, less motivated to pursue the goal and less likely to engage in a goal-consistent behavior. We test our hypotheses in several studies looking at goals such as being physically fit and being healthy, where we both measure and manipulate goal difficulty.

Study 1 (N = 163) examined a common student goal – to be physically fit. Participants were told that a governmental agency is promoting a challenge across universities to see whether people can manage to lose weight and be physically fit, where the challenge will involve losing 8 pounds. Next, participants either wrote a plan about how they would accomplish such a goal or, in the control condition, wrote about everything that comes to mind for the same period of time. As the key dependent variable, participants were asked if they would participate in such a challenge should it come to their university. Lastly, participants selected whether this goal would be relatively easy, moderately difficult or extremely difficult to achieve. When participants felt the goal would be relatively easy, planners (22.6%) were less likely to participate in the challenge than non-planners (39.3%; p = .04). When the goal seemed moderately difficult, planners (70.6%) were more likely to participate in the challenge than non-planners (53.9%; p = .03). When the goal seemed extremely difficult, both planners (23.5%) and non-planners were equally unlikely to participate in the challenge (19.0%; p = .52).

Study 2 (N = 219) examined the goal of being healthy. First, participants wrote about the importance of being healthy, eating healthy and cutting calories to increase the salience of the goal. Next, they were told that reducing the number of calories they consume is a crucial step to eating healthier. They were assigned to decrease their calorie intake by 300, 700, or 900 calories, which were
pre-determined to be the number of calories other participants felt would be relatively easy, moderately difficult, or extremely difficult to eliminate from their diet. Some participants formed a detailed plan of how they will pursue this goal, whereas others spent an equivalent amount of time writing about how they spent their prior day. Following an unrelated fifteen-minute filler task, participants were told to exit through a side door where a student was doing school work and had a visible bowl of miniature candy bars on her desk. Each participant was offered to take as many as he or she wants under the pretense that these are department holiday candy, while the number of candies taken was secretly recorded and was the key dependent variable. When the goal was easy (improving diet by 300 calories), planners (1.46) took significantly more candy bars than non-planners (.61; p < .01). When the goal was of moderate difficulty (improving diet by 700 calories), planners (.48) took significantly fewer candy bars than non-planners (1; p = .01). Lastly, when the goal was extremely difficult (improving diet by 900 calories), there was no significant difference among planners (1.19) and non-planners in the number of candy bars they picked up (1.44; p = .26).

This work contributes to prior research on the impact of planning on goal pursuit. We demonstrate that forming a plan can increase or decrease peoples’ likelihood to engage in goal consistent actions and their motivation to pursue the goal, and show that the relationship between planning and goal pursuit often depends on the difficulty of the goal.

Planned but Not Purchased? A Field Study of Drivers and Consequences of Failed Purchases

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When investigating shopping behaviors that show deviations from shoppers’ plans, research has focused on unplanned purchases (e.g., Inman et al. 2009; Kollat and Willett 1967). However, little is known about the purchases consumers plan but do not complete (Park et al. 1989). These “failed” purchases have important implications, as they suggest a lost opportunity for purchase conversion and revenue. To the best of our knowledge, our research is the first that comprehensively examines the drivers and consequences of failed purchases in a field study.

We define failed purchases as products that were planned at the beginning of the shopping trip (i.e. explicitly identified as planned by the shopper, see Inman et al. 2009) but were neither substituted nor bought by the end of the trip. In this analysis we focus on three groups of factors — shopper characteristics (shopping enjoyment, price sensitivity, and propensity to plan), trip aspects (duration, number of aisles, and availability of a written list), and category characteristics (fresh, refrigerated, frozen, and hedonic categories).

Research has shown that consumers who extract hedonic value from shopping are more impulsive (e.g., Beatty and Ferrell 1998) and more receptive to in-store stimuli. The more product and display information shoppers take in, the more likely they are to deliberately change their plans or to become distracted and forget about them. Thus, we expect that shopping enjoyment will lead to more failed purchases (H1). Furthermore, we hypothesize that price-sensitive consumers will prioritize the goal of paying low prices over the goal of acquiring products. Therefore, we predict that higher price sensitivity will lead to a greater number of failed purchases (H2). Since research on the “intention-behavior gap” has shown that detailed action planning mediates intentions and behavior (Snijhotta et al. 2005), we argue that individuals’ chronic tendency to plan positively impacts plan fulfillment (H3).

The influence of shopping trip duration on unplanned purchases is well established in the literature (e.g., Inman et al. 2009). The longer consumers shop, the more they are exposed to in-store stimuli which may ultimately diminish their self-regulatory resources (Muraven and Baumeister 2000). Consequently, longer trips are associated with a greater number of failed purchases as the consumer is less likely to stick to her plan (H4). Similarly, the more aisles shoppers, the greater the number of stimuli the shopper is exposed to and therefore, the higher the likelihood of unpurchased items (H5). Finally, we predict that a written list will help the shopper to follow through (H6), since research indicated that the explicit form of a plan fosters its attainment (Snijhotta et al. 2005). Moreover, having a written list suggests that shopping goals are concrete which makes it harder to influence shopping behavior (Lee and Ariely 2006).

While failed purchases directly impact retailers’ revenues, we investigate a less obvious consequence — shopper’s satisfaction with the store. Research has shown that when individuals experience goal failure, dissatisfaction with the task results (Locke and Latham 1990). Furthermore, consumers are likely to direct their disappointment from product failure or stockouts towards the manufacturer or retailer (Folkes 1984; Fitzsimons 2000). Thus, we expect that the greater the number of failed purchases, the lower the satisfaction with the store (H7). Furthermore, we argue that the detrimental effect on satisfaction is even stronger when a written list is used (H8). Since the written list represents the shopper’s commitment to her plan, it explicitly documents the discrepancy between intention and result, thus increasing the shopper’s dissatisfaction.

To test our hypotheses, we use data from 2401 shoppers from the 2012 shopper intercept study conducted by the Point of Purchase Advertising Institute (POPAI). Before entering the store, shoppers indicated their planned purchases. Once shoppers completed their trips, interviewers copied the receipts and collected information about personality traits, trip characteristics, and overall store satisfaction. We find that 18% of planned purchases do not make it to the shopper’s cart. To test our predictions regarding the drivers of failed purchases, we estimated a hierarchical model since the data represent a multilevel structure (i.e., purchases nested within shoppers). The dependent variable is type of purchase (planned, failed, unplanned, or substitute) and, for the results presented here, it represents the probability of a failed vs. a planned purchase. To analyze the effects of failed purchases on satisfaction, we used regression analyses.

Our results show that shopping enjoyment, price sensitivity, adjusted trip duration, and number of aisles shopped increase the probability of failed purchases. Conversely, general propensity to plan and the use of a written shopping list decrease this probability. Interestingly, we find that shoppers who are price sensitive but also enjoy shopping are more likely to fulfill their plans. At the category level, we find that failed purchases are less likely to be fresh or refrigerated but more likely to be frozen products. Additionally, our analysis on satisfaction supports our prediction that failed purchases lead to lower satisfaction with the retailer. As expected, we find that having a written list accentuates the detrimental effect of failed purchases.

Taken together, our results demonstrate that a number of shoppers, trip and category factors influence the incidence of failed purchases. More importantly, failure to follow through with one’s shopping plan is associated with lower satisfaction with the store. Thus, failed purchases cause a “double whammy” for retailers. Not only is there a loss of profits due to the unpurchased items, but a potentially even greater loss due to dissatisfied shoppers who may migrate or spread negative word-of-mouth. Interestingly, we find that having a shopping list is a double-edged sword: it helps shoppers to complete...
their plans but it also makes plan failures more salient. In conclusion, our research is the first to provide a comprehensive view on a scarcely researched but important component of in-store decision making.

A Metacognitive Perspective on the Motivational Benefits of Planning Across Domains

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers often make plans sequentially in different, unrelated domains. For instance, they may plan a vacation, then decide on their grocery shopping for the week. What effects does planning in one domain have on subsequent planning in a different domain? In this research, we examine how different types of plans made in the first domain influence motivation to plan in the second domain. Prior literature has demonstrated the positive role of planning in achieving goals such as exercising more (Sniehotta et al. 2005) and following beneficial medical routine (Gollwitzer and Ettingen 2007). Planning helps people develop and implement behavioral intentions (Gollwitzer 1999). However, whether benefits of planning can be “transferred” from the first domain to the second one is an open question. We are particularly interested in the role of two types of plans, concrete versus abstract.

Learning or skill transfer is an important component of many consumer behaviors (e.g., Hutchinson and Eisenstein 2008). Prior literature on learning and problem solving suggests that transfer often does not occur between conceptually similar but perceptually different problems because people cannot make connections between situations that have different surface structures (Barnett and Ceci 2002). Ways of facilitating transfer across domains focus on getting participants to work with training materials at a deep or strategic level (Gick and Holyoak 1980). More generally, learning metacognitive strategies such as analytical thinking, self-explanation, and self-regulation often leads to successful transfer (Halpern 1998).

We hypothesize that when compared with concrete planning where people specify all event details, abstract planning where people answer questions regarding why their goal is important to them will be more effective in enhancing motivation to plan in a second unrelated domain. The reasons for this proposition are three-fold. First, answering the “why” question encourages people to focus on causal relationships that connect actions to outcomes. This metacognitive justification process has been shown to improve consumers’ performance beyond that of simply verbalization or specifying a plan (Huang and Hutchinson 2013). Furthermore, thinking about why the desired goal is important might prime “importance” and make people regard the second domain as important (Chartrand and Bargh 1996). Second, thinking in an abstract way makes people forward-looking and focus more on the future (Fujita et al. 2006). Third, asking people to specify their plans may encourage them to put too much emphasis on specifics of the original plan, which might increase their perceived difference between the two irrelevant domains as they pay much attention on the surface features (Barnett and Ceci 2002).

We tested these hypotheses in three studies. In Study 1 (N=155), we randomly assigned participants to three conditions: concrete planning, abstract planning, and control. In both planning conditions, participants created a detailed plan for a forthcoming event. In concrete planning condition, participants provided details such as when, where, with whom, and specific activities they would engage in. In abstract planning condition, participants answered why the event was important to them, the overall goal and specific objectives they wanted to achieve, and why these goals were important to them. The control group participants did nothing at this stage. All participants were then asked to indicate their motivation to plan to live a healthy lifestyle next month by answering questions including whether effort they would put into developing a plan, the importance of developing an effective plan, motivation to engage in activities to live a healthy life, and effort to fit living a healthy lifestyle into their daily schedule. Consistent with our hypothesis, people forming an abstract plan (including “why”) in the first domain demonstrated the greatest motivation to plan living a healthy lifestyle when compared with both concrete and control conditions (ps < .05); there was no difference between the latter two conditions.

In Study 2 (N=257), we added one abstract-without-why condition where people answered similar questions as in the original abstract planning condition without the questions of why the event and the goals they would achieve were important. It was found that forming an abstract plan without answering the “why” question was not as effective as the original abstract condition and did not differ from either the concrete or control conditions in increasing people’s motivation to plan for a second domain.

We hypothesized that the abstract-without-why planning condition might make individuals look forward and focus on the whole picture; however, it does not share the same benefits resulting from the metacognitive processing and the heightened importance of the second domain as in the abstract-with-why planning condition. Thus, once the second domain is important to people, it is possible that performance of the abstract-without-why condition may improve. To test this proposition, in Study 3 (N=356) we manipulated goal importance. Specifically, after participants finished their planning in the first domain, we asked them to rank order seven domains (e.g., living a healthy lifestyle, saving/investing money for the future, etc.) based on how important each domain was to them. They were then randomly assigned to answer planning motivation questions for either their most or least important domain. Both a main effect of domain importance and an interaction effect between domain importance and planning type emerged. Specifically, when the second domain was the participant’s least important domain, there was no difference across planning conditions. However, when the second domain was participants’ most important domain, both abstract planning conditions (with and without why questions) led to greater planning motivation than both the concrete and the control conditions.

Results from three studies suggest the beneficial effect of planning at a metacognitive level on increasing motivation to plan in a second irrelevant domain. We discuss the implications for both consumers and public policy makers.

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