Exploring the Links Between Action Crises, Cognitions, and Goal-Related Evaluations in Consumer Contexts

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Across four experiments, this research explores the nature of action crisis cognitions. A mindset-like shift toward cost-benefit cognitions seems to co-occur with action crisis situations despite shielding and implemental cognitive tuning. Action crisis downwardly influences goal evaluations of desirability and feasibility which in turn decreases consumer commitment to goals.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The psychology of quitting goals offers an intriguing lens through which to reconsider consumer goal pursuit. Goals are mental representations of desired future states (Austin and Vancouver 1996; Fishbach, Shah, and Kruglanski 2004). Once a goal is set, whether it is sticking with a physician, purchasing an environmentally-friendly brand of products, or keeping at a weight-loss diet, a growing body of research points to shielding (Shah 2005) and cognitive tuning (Gollwitzer and Bayer 1999) in support of existing goal pursuits. Research has only recently begun to shed light on the mechanisms that break through these goal-protective mechanisms when individuals reduce effort toward or quit goals (e.g. Carver and Scheier 2000; Jostmann and Koole 2009; Louro, Pieters, and Zeelenberg 2007).

Most recently, Brandstätter and Schüler (2013) identify an action crisis “mindset shift,” a return to cognitions about costs and benefits in the middle of goal pursuit, as an important mechanism in the mental process of goal disengagement. Addressing fundamental theoretical questions within goal disengagement theory (Shah and Kruglanski 2008), the present research seeks to explore the nature of action crisis cognitions as well as the impact of action crises on goal commitment. Across four experiments, evidence is found that when consumers imagine or think about an action crisis (a goal pursuit phase where goal setbacks/difficulties lead to an intra-psiycic conflict on whether to continue or discontinue goal pursuit- Brandstätter, Herrmann, and Schüler 2013) cost-benefit cognitions break through the implemental cognitive focus normally associated with action phases of goal pursuit (Dhar, Huber, and Khan 2007; Chandran and Morwitz 2005; Gollwitzer, Heckhausen, and Steller 1990). Working through reduced desirability and feasibility evaluations, action crises lead to decreases in goal commitment that likely precede actual disengagement.

Experiments 1A-1C: Consumer Situations and Action Crisis Cognitions

The first three experiments seek to provide initial evidence that action crisis situations serve as an impetus for the breakthrough of disengagement cost-benefit cognitions in the actional phase of goal pursuit. These studies serve to test whether the pattern of cost-benefit cognitions observed by Brandstätter and Schüler (2013) during an action crisis holds for three different forms of consumer goal pursuits: 1) a service relationship goal (patient-provider relationship, N=75); 2) a product purchasing goal (purchasing environmentally-friendly products, N=72); and 3) a consumption reduction goal (pursuing a weight-loss diet, N=78). Three main categories of goal-related cost-benefits cognitions were examined in these scenario-based studies to investigate differences between participants in an action crisis condition and a no action crisis condition. When imagining themselves in an action crisis situation, participants should report a greater degree of thoughts about costs (CD) and benefits (BD) of disengaging from a goal. The benefits of continuing a goal remain activated during the actional phase of goal pursuit (Brandstätter and Schüler 2013) making it more likely that thoughts about the benefits of continuing (BC) a goal will be higher or roughly equal to the action crisis condition when participants are in a no action crisis condition.

Across the first three experiments, the prediction that action crisis participants would report a higher degree of disengagement-related cost-benefit cognitions was supported. Participants in the action crisis condition reported a significantly higher degree of thoughts about costs and benefits of discontinuing the goal pursuit. This pattern was repeated across all three consumer goal contexts. For continuation-related cost-benefit thoughts, results were consistent for self-reported thoughts about benefits of continuing the goal, with the action crisis condition participants reporting significantly lower degrees of this type of thought than no action crisis participants. Results were more equivocal (as expected) for thoughts related to costs of continuing the goal with non-significant results in experiment 1A and 1B and an elevated level of these thoughts for action crisis participants in experiment 1C.

Experiment 2: Action Crisis and Goal-Related Evaluations

The second experiment (N=142) connected the effects of action crisis situations to goal desirability, goal feasibility, and goal commitment while replicating the cost-benefit cognition findings of the first set of experiments. Moving beyond imagined scenarios, participants reflected on a self-selected personal goal in this experiment for improved ecological validity. Adding to the cost-benefit cognition predictions of the first experimental sequence, participants responded to a series of items relating to action crisis (Brandstätter and Schüler 2013), goal desirability, goal feasibility, and goal commitment. The effect of action crisis on goal commitment, an important determinant of goal disengagement (Carver and Scheier 1998), should be mediated by changes in goal-related evaluations of desirability and feasibility (Brehm and Self 1989; Herrmann and Brandstätter 2013).

In experiment 2, cost-benefit cognition findings from the first experimental sequence were largely replicated with a self-selected goal rather than an imagined scenario. The results also confirmed the proposed mediational relationship, with goal desirability and feasibility mediating the relationship between action crisis and goal commitment.

General Discussion

The four experiments and their results begin to build evidence about how action crisis situations affect consumers. Existing mindset work in psychology (Gollwitzer and Bayer 1999) and consumer research (Chandran and Morwitz 2005; Dhar et al. 2007; Lee and Ariely 2006) heavily relies on the distinction between pre-decisional and post-decisional stages of goal pursuit. However, a situation like an action crisis begins to blur the seemingly clear conceptual boundaries between these stages of goal pursuit (Carver and Scheier 2000; Herrmann and Brandstätter 2013). As the results begin to show in these four experiments, a mindset-like shift seems to co-occur with action crisis situations.

This mindset-like shift refocuses consumers on cost-benefit cognitions in this middle of post-decisional goal pursuit despite the effects of shielding (Shah 2005) and implemental cognitive tuning (Gollwitzer et al. 1990) that should prevent this breakthrough of deliberative cognitions. As shown in the fourth experiment, an action crisis downwardly influences the fundamental goal evaluations of desirability and feasibility which in turn decreases consumer commitment to an existing goal. While much work remains, the current work challenges existing theoretical accounts of goal pursuit and begins to establish the place of action crisis and its associated cognitions in the psychology of consumer goal disengagement.
REFERENCES