Continue Or Give Up? How Publicity and Self-Monitoring Influence Goal Persistence

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We examine whether goal publicity and self-monitoring affect goal persistence. Across three experiments, we demonstrate that high self-monitors are more likely to persist following a public failure than a private failure. We also explore two boundary conditions feedback and perceived value of the incentive for achieving the goal.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We examine whether the public or private nature of consumer goals affects goal persistence following initial goal failure. In particular, we explore the moderating role of self-monitoring. Across three experiments, we demonstrate that high self-monitors are more likely to persist following a public failure than a private failure. However, the public versus private nature of the goal does not affect low self-monitors’ persistence. We also explore two boundary conditions for this effect by manipulating the timing of feedback and by testing the role of the perceived value of the incentive for achieving the goal. The article concludes with a discussion of theoretical and managerial insights from this work.

Every day, consumers engage in a variety of goal pursuit decisions (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 1999; Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Koo & Fishbach, 2008; Zhang, Fishbach, & Dhar, 2007). On their way to goal attainment, consumers sometimes encounter failure, and are then left to decide – should they persist with goal efforts or abandon the goal altogether (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Fishbach & Finkelstein, 2011; Soman & Cheema, 2004)? We address questions about when and why consumers persist following failures by studying the interplay between goal publicity, self-monitoring and goal persistence.

Doing so allows us to make several contributions. First, while it is well established that public goals lead to greater goal persistence, little research explores whether this persistence holds even after a failure. We argue that publicity of goals can be a double edged sword, leading to either greater commitment towards or greater divesting away from goals (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2009; Parrott, Monahan, Ainsworth, & Steiner, 1998). Therefore, the impact of goal publicity on post failure persistence is unclear. Second, while research explores the impact of a variety of individual differences that impact post failure persistence, no research (to our knowledge) has explored the role of self-monitoring in this context.

Private versus public goals and motivation. Making goals public, which is defined as making significant others aware of one’s goals, has a positive effect on goal persistence because it is easy to abandon a goal known only to oneself, but it is hard to abandon a goal that is known to others (Jones, et al., 1972; Pallak & Cummins, 1976; Salancik, 1977). ‘One’s motivation to avoid anticipated personal and social disapproval for failing to follow through with promised actions is one explanation for these effects (Parrott, et al., 1998). Furthermore, Bem’s (1967) self-perception theory suggests that individuals who make a public commitment to an action may interpret the act of making a public commitment as a signal of their high motivation to engage in the promised action (Bem, 1967). Prior research has shown that public commitment leads to high levels of weight loss motivation (Nyer & Dellande, 2010), increased recycling behaviors and reduced gas and electricity consumption (Pallak & Cummins, 1976; Salancik, 1977).

The role of self-monitoring. We posit that goal publicity will not affect all consumers in the same way because not all individuals are equally influenced by social approval or disapproval. Specifically, we propose individual differences in self-monitoring will moderate the effect of goal publicity on goal persistence. Self-monitoring assesses the extent to which people regulate their own behavior in order to look good in the eyes of others (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986; Snyder & Simpson, 1984). High self-monitors attend to their environment and adapt to new situations, so that their behavior varies across different settings. In contrast, low self-monitors are (relatively speaking) more consistent across different social situations and are generally oblivious to how others see them. Thus we expect that the motivating effect of publicity will be stronger for high self-monitors than low self-monitors, because the former will be especially concerned with the construction of their public selves (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000; Nyer & Dellande, 2010). Formally,

H1: After a goal failure, the effects of goal publicity on goal persistence will be moderated by self-monitoring such that for high self-monitors public (as compared to private) goals will increase goal persistence, but for low self-monitors, goal publicity should have no effect on post failure persistence.

Boundary conditions: feedback timing and incentive value. Previous research indicates the importance of feedback in influencing subsequent goal (e.g., Finkelstein & Fishbach 2011). Previous research also examined whether people seek feedback strategically to motivate themselves (Finkelstein & Fishbach, 2012). In the current research, as this effect of failure is presumed to be driven by public failure, we predict that if failure feedback is not provided until after the decision about whether to continue or quit, the effect of goal publicity and self-monitoring on goal persistence will be attenuated. Feedback towards the goal leads to better performance toward a goal by informing the individual about the discrepancy between the goal and the performance (Fishbach & Finkelstein, 2011; Neubert, 1998). Therefore, we predict,

H2: When consumers receive immediate failure feedback, we expect to observe the self-monitoring by goal publicity interaction specified in H1, but when consumers do not receive feedback, we expect that all consumer goal persistence will be attenuated.

Incentive programs which offer consumers awards for achieving goals are effective in a variety of situations (Lee, Locke, & Phan, 1997; Schmidt & DeShon, 2007). For example, Schmidt and DeShon (2007) find that incentives offered for goal attainment determine how people resolve goal-performance discrepancies. As a result, we predict that if the perceived value of the incentive awarded for achieving the goal is low, the goal publicity by self-monitoring interaction will be attenuated because the social consequences of goal failure are lower for small than large incentives (Huang, Zhang, & Broniarczyk, 2012; Seta, Donaldson, & Seta, 1999). Therefore, when incentives for achieving goals are not perceived as valuable, even high self-monitors should care little about appearances, and persist less, even after failure. Therefore,

H3: When the incentive for achieving the goal is perceived to be high, we expect to observe the self-monitoring by goal publicity interaction specified in H1, but when the incentive for achieving the goal is perceived to be low, the interaction of goal publicity and self-monitoring will be attenuated.

We tested our predictions in three studies. Across the three studies, our results show converging evidence that self-monitoring moderates the relationship between publicity and goal persistence such that high self-monitors, but not low self-monitors, are more likely to persist at goals following failure in public than in private conditions. In addition, high self-monitors are especially sensitive to goal publicity effects, especially when they perceive the incentive for achieving the goal is valuable and when they have feedback about initial goal failure.