Goal Specificity, Subjective Impact, and the Dynamics of Consumer Motivation

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Specific and non-specific goals are both prevalent in consumers’ lives. Dieters can target a specific weight or aim to maximize weight loss. Families can budget weekly grocery expenditures or aim to minimize spending. Using a framework of goals-as-reference points, we explore dynamic motivational differences between specific and non-specific consumer goals.

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Consumers often adopt and pursue goals that lack specific objectives. This lack of specificity does not make such goals unimportant; a consumer with a financial goal to waste as little money as possible is no less concerned about his finances than one who sets a precise budget. In a pilot survey we found that non-specific personal goals were as common as specific goals and goal specificity was uncorrelated with how important the goal was to the individual. This indicates that non-specific goals are as prevalent and important as specific goals in consumers’ lives.

The present research looks at how the dynamics of motivation differ for non-specific versus specific goals. Whereas past work has examined the effects of goal specificity on goal commitment (Wright and Kacmar 1994; Naylor and Ilgen 1984), perceived difficulty (Ulkkumen and Cheema 2011), and goal achievement (Locke et al. 1989), we consider how goal specificity alters the effects of progress on subsequent motivation. Building on a framework of goals as reference points (Heath, Larrick and Wu 1999), we explore how consumers evaluate goal progress without a salient end-state reference point. We argue that, in such cases, individuals are likely to compare their progress along the goal dimension to the initial-state reference point (Koo and Fishbach 2008, 2012; Wiebenga and Fennis 2014). This change in monitoring should make incremental steps of progress seem less impactful as progress along the goal dimension accumulates, undermining subsequent motivation (Bonezzi, Brendl and DeAngelis 2011). This is remarkably different from the dynamics of specific goals, where a large body of literature has shown generally positive effects of progress on subsequent motivation (e.g., Kivetz, Urmsinsky and Zheng 2006).

We tested the predicted effects of goal specificity and progress in three empirical studies. Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated that specificity moderates the effect of progress on motivation during goal pursuit, and that progress decreases subsequent motivation for consumers with non-specific goals. Study 1 assigned participants either a specific or a maximizing goal for an effortful lab game and found that those with a maximizing goal felt significantly less motivated after completing more rounds of the game, whereas those with a specific goal did not. Study 2 conceptually replicated this finding by asking participants to imagine pursuing a specific or a maximizing weight loss goal. Participants with a maximizing goal reported that they would feel significantly less motivated after losing a larger amount of weight, whereas those with a specific weight loss goal did not.

Study 3 tested the underlying mechanism of subjective impact, and also examined the effects of progress in the domain of personal budgeting, where consumers seek to restrain their progress along the goal dimension (i.e., dollars spent). Participants who read about a scenario in which they had a non-specific budget for holiday gifts (i.e., minimizing goal) showed significantly less preference for an inexpensive purchase option (vs. a premium option) after having spent relatively more money so far, whereas those with a specific goal showed the opposite effect. This change was mediated by a decline in subjective impact: participants with a non-specific goal reported that the price difference between purchase options seemed less impactful when they had spent relatively more money already.

Together, these three studies demonstrate that consumers with non-specific goals react to progress in a manner very different from consumers with specific goals. As they move further from their initial reference point along the goal dimension, consumers see incremental steps of progress as less impactful and therefore they become less motivated. This occurs both when progress along the goal dimension is desirable (e.g., pounds lost) and when it is undesirable (e.g., dollars spent).

Our work offers an important theoretical contribution by connecting prior work on goal specificity (Locke et al. 1989; Wright and Kacmar 1994; Ulkkumen and Cheema 2011) with the growing literature on the role of reference points and subjective impact in goal pursuit (Heath et al. 1999; Bonezzi et al. 2011; Koo and Fishbach 2012). In doing so, we identify a novel effect of specificity on the dynamics of motivation and shed new light on the psychology of non-specific consumer goals.

These findings also have several implications for marketers and consumers. Most notably, whereas marketers can encourage consumers to work toward specific consumption-related goals (e.g., loyalty program rewards, product collections) by emphasizing progress or even donating progress (Nunes and Dreze 2006; Kivetz et al. 2006), these strategies are likely to backfire in the context of non-specific goals. Such issues are also likely to arise for group goals, as past research suggests that people attend to much of the same information when pursuing group goals as they do when pursuing personal goals (Koo and Fishbach 2008; Huang and Zhang 2011). Consequently, marketing communications aimed at encouraging participation in group goals (e.g., fundraising drives, petitions) should be framed differently for non-specific versus specific goals. Once a fair amount of progress has accumulated for non-specific group goals, consumers will feel that their contribution has very little impact on the overall goal and therefore be less likely to participate. Marketers may be able to overcome this problem by directly bolstering the subjective impact of consumers’ individual contributions, or by encouraging comparisons to more proximal reference points (e.g., social comparisons, subgoals, prior performance) rather than the initial-state reference point.

**REFERENCES**


Wright, P. M., & Kacmar, K. M. (1994). Goal specificity as a determinant of goal commitment and goal change. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes.*