Driven By the Cues: Goal Attainment Makes Consumers More Responsive to Shopping-Related Contextual Cues

Sebastian Sadowski, University of Groningen, The Netherlands
Bob M. Fennis, University of Groningen, The Netherlands
Koert van Ittersum, University of Groningen, The Netherlands

We demonstrate how goals overriding the shopping goal drive consumer responsiveness to subtle contextual cues. We show that assortment structure can lead to product choices from varying locations, but only when highly desired goals (e.g., hunger has been satisfied) have been already attained, not when they are merely anticipated.

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Sebastian Sadowski, Maastricht University, The Netherlands
Bob Fennis, University of Groningen, The Netherlands
Koert van Ittersum, University of Groningen, The Netherlands

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The literature on consumer behavior considers shopping behavior as predominantly goal-oriented (e.g., Kopetz et al., 2012). Nonetheless, shopping goals do not always need to be at the top of consumers minds and they can sometimes be pushed to the background by other, overriding, more desired goals. To date, scant research has been devoted to the interplay between consumer shopping goals and other salient, concurrently active goals and the impact of such interference on consumer decision-making. Various goals can accompany consumers in their daily life (e.g., taking a train, arriving at a specific location, going to work) and disparate goals of differing motivational intensity could be active at the same time (Pieters, Baumgartner and Allen, 1995). In this research we focus particularly on the anticipation and the attainment of such highly desired goals, investigating how either having a salient, highly desired goal that needs to be attained in the near future or having attained this particular goal influences responsiveness to shopping-related contextual cues and subsequently location-based preferences, that is, selecting products from specific locations.

We posit that when a shopping goal is pushed to the background, the influence of shopping-related cues on consumer decision-making will be attenuated (Ferguson & Bargh, 2004). Therefore, when other salient, highly desired goals are potent enough to inhibit the goal of shopping, we expect that consumers become less susceptible to the influence of shopping-related contextual cues (i.e., assortment structure). On the other hand, when other, shopping-unrelated goals have already been attained, consumers open up and approach shopping in a more goal-oriented way, dedicating greater processing capacity to their product selection (Gable & Harmon-Jones, 2010). They process not only separate products, but also their global visual configuration. As a result, consumer decision-making is more likely then to be shaped by subtle contextual manipulations in product organizations.

Our expectations are derived predominantly from goal systems theory (Kruglanski et al., 2012). Various goals that are simultaneously activated compete for cognitive resources, pulling mental resources from each other. The more resources are dedicated to a particular goal, the less resources are left for other coinciding goal pursuits (Kruglanski et al., 2002). An important factor determining the allocation of resources across competing goals is motivational intensity. Goals characterized by highest motivational intensity pull the most mental resources, leaving only a limited processing capacity for other, less desired but coinciding goals and associated with them contextual cues (Kruglanski et al., 2002). Therefore, we expect that sensitivity towards goal-irrelevant contextual cues is attenuated when other, more desired goals are concurrently active.

In order to test this proposition, following Bar-Hillel (2015), we expect that when other goals have been attained, consumers will select products located closer to the center of an assortment (i.e., edge aversion) while selecting from equivalent assortments (assortments composed of products varying only across a few attributes), whereas selecting products from nonequivalent assortments (assortments composed of products varying across numerous attributes) will shift consumers’ product preferences closer to the edge of an assortment (i.e., edge preference).

Study 1

100 students participated in a 2 (goal state: anticipation vs. attainment) × 2 (assortment structure: equivalent vs. nonequivalent) mixed design experiment, where goal state was manipulated between-subjects and assortment structure within-subjects.

Participants were invited to play a Tic-Tac-Toe game and were informed that the study examined their performance during games. Five games of Tic-Tac-Toe were played in total by each participant. We varied goal states by either asking participants to make the choice of their most preferred product before (anticipation) or after (attainment) they have played the game. Participants selected products from two different assortments: evidently equivalent (Ice Creams) and nonequivalent (Candy Packages) assortments, consisting of 64 different products. Our focal dependent variable was the centrality of the product choice, coded from 1 to 7, with the higher value representing a more central option chosen.

Results

A repeated measures ANOVA with goal state as a between-subjects factor and assortment structure as a within-subjects factor revealed a significant interaction between goal state and assortment structure (F(1, 90)=4.04, p<.05). Additional simple main effects analysis showed that the interaction was predominantly driven by participants in the goal attainment condition. Participants who have already attained monetary rewards and were selecting products from an equivalent assortment were more likely to go to the center of the equivalent assortment (M=4.44, SD=1.53) in comparison with those who attained monetary rewards and were choosing products from a nonequivalent assortment (M=3.42, SD=1.62, F(1,90)=9.86, p<.01). When the rewards were anticipated assortment structure did not steer participants to choose products from different locations (F<1).

Study 2

100 students participated in a 2 (goal state: anticipation vs. attainment) × 2 (assortment structure: equivalent vs. nonequivalent) mixed design experiment, where goal state was manipulated between-subjects and assortment structure within-subjects.

Participants were approached with a survey either before they ate in a Burger King restaurant or after they had already eaten there. Participants were presented with two different assortments: evidently equivalent (donuts) and nonequivalent (bread spreads). For each assortment 99 products were shown (9×11 grid).

Akin to study 1, our core dependent variable was the centrality of the choice, coded from 1 to 10, with the higher value representing a more central option chosen.

Results

A repeated measures ANOVA with goal state as a between-subjects factor and assortment structure as a within-subjects factor revealed a significant interaction between goal state and assortment structure (F(1, 89)=5.07, p<.05). Additional simple main effects analysis showed that, in line with our expectations, the interaction was predominantly driven by participants in the goal attainment condition. Participants who had already eaten and were selecting from nonequivalent assortments were more likely to go to the center of the equivalent assortment (M=6.54, SD=2.12) in com-
comparison with participants who had already eaten and were choosing products from a nonequivalent assortment ($M=5.41$, $SD=2.32$; $F(1, 89)=10.67$, $p<.01$). The structure of assortment did not make participants choose products from different locations when they were anticipating to satisfy their hunger ($F < 1$).

REFERENCES