

Research Report

Can't finish what you started? The effect of climactic interruption on behavior

Daniella M. Kumor^{*,1}, Taly Reich¹, Baba Shiv

Stanford Graduate School of Business, 655 Knight Way, Stanford, CA 94305, USA

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Abstract

Individuals experience a greater frequency of interruptions than ever before. Interruptions by e-mails, phone calls, text messages and other sources of disruption are ubiquitous. We examine the important unanswered question of whether interruptions can increase the likelihood that individuals will choose closure-associated behaviors. Specifically, we explore the possibility that interruptions that occur during the climactic moments of a task or activity can produce a heightened need for psychological closure. When an interruption prevents individuals from achieving closure in the interrupted domain, we show that the resulting unsatisfied need for psychological closure can cause individuals to seek closure in totally unrelated domains. These findings have important implications for understanding how consumer decisions may be influenced by the dynamic—and often interrupted—course of daily events.

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Individuals experience a greater frequency of interruptions and multitasking than ever before (Carrier, Cheever, Rosen, Benitez, & Chang, 2009). For example, undergraduates are interrupted every 2 minutes by instant messages, e-mail, and other sources of disruption when using computers (Benbunan-Fich & Truman, 2009). Adults are also interrupted with increasing frequency—in fact, office workers are interrupted every 5 minutes by e-mails alone (Jackson, Dawson, & Wilson, 2001). While significant research reveals that interruptions are ubiquitous, surprisingly little research has examined the impact of these interruptions—and their timing—on subsequent decisions.

Interruptions

Interruptions are conceptualized as externally-generated events that disrupt an individual's cognitive focus on a focal task (Corragio, 1990). Research has most frequently operationalized

interruptions as secondary tasks that individuals must complete before they can return to a focal task, or as a mechanical failure that disrupts a focal activity (e.g., the failure of a tape player that prevents individuals from listening to the entirety of an audio message) (Worchel & Arnold, 1974; Xia & Sudharshan, 2002).

Perhaps the most well-known consequence of interruptions is the Zeigarnik effect, which suggests that uncompleted (versus completed) tasks are better remembered (Zeigarnik, 1927). More recently, research has begun to explore the impact of interruptions on consumer behavior. For example, Liu (2008) found that interruptions increase consumers' choice of desirable rather than feasible options. Recent research also reveals that interruptions can impact consumers' affective experiences—for example, frequent interruptions decrease consumers' satisfaction when they shop online (Xia & Sudharshan, 2002). Nelson and Meyvis (2008) found that the affective consequences of interruptions depend on the valence of the interrupted task. Specifically, they found that interruptions improve positive experiences and worsen negative experiences (also see Nelson, Meyvis, & Galak, 2009). In sum, while recent research has begun to explore the impact of interruptions on consumer behavior, research to date has solely examined the effect of interruptions on the interrupted consumer task rather than on subsequent and unrelated consumer decisions.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: dkupor@stanford.edu (D.M. Kumor), treich@stanford.edu (T. Reich), bshiv@stanford.edu (B. Shiv).

¹ These authors contributed equally to this work.

Interruptions and need for psychological closure

Both the ubiquity of interruptions and anecdotal experience suggest that interruptions can occur during moments in which individuals are relatively indifferent about whether they finish a current activity, as well as during moments in which they are highly eager to finish an activity. Significant literature indicates that an individual's motivation to complete a goal-oriented activity critically depends on his/her temporal distance from the desired end (Henderson, Beck, & Palmatier, 2011; Kivetz, Urminsky, & Zheng, 2006; Touré-Tillery & Fishbach, 2011). Building on this research, we investigate whether an individual's desire to finish an interrupted activity depends on the timing of the interruption. Specifically, we examine whether an individual's desire to finish an interrupted activity is heightened when an interruption disrupts the climactic moments of an activity or task. A climax is defined as "the most intense, exciting, or important point of something" (Oxford Dictionaries). Phone calls, text messages, and other sources of disruption can sometimes interrupt the climactic moments of a variety of activities, including conversations, television shows, books, and news articles. The current research investigates whether these climactic interruptions foster a heightened need for psychological closure.

Significant research suggests that interruptions can generate a need for closure. Indeed, it is well documented that individuals are motivated to complete an activity that they have started, and that interruptions increase individuals' desire to complete an interrupted task (Klinger, 1975; Lewin, 1926, 1935; Martin & Tesser, 1996; Ovsiankina, 1928). This increased desire can even persist when individuals are permanently prevented from finishing an activity (Carver & Sheier, 1998; Lewin, 1926; Martin & Tesser, 1996). We posit that certain interruptions can intensify this unsatisfied need for psychological closure. Specifically, we hypothesize that climactic interruptions (interruptions that disrupt the climactic moments of an activity or task) are more likely to foster an unsatisfied need for psychological closure than interruptions that occur during non-climactic intervals. This is because, by definition, a climactic interruption prevents individuals from experiencing the imminent resolution to a focal climactic build-up, which in turn may intensify individuals' perception that they have been left hanging by a target event and thus increase their desire to attain closure (Beike, Adams, & Wirth-Beaumont, 2007; Beike & Wirth-Beaumont, 2005).

An unsatisfied need for closure provokes behaviors targeted toward the attainment of closure (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). Research reveals that mind-sets, desires, and goals activated during cognitive activity in one domain can persist to influence subsequent decisions in unrelated domains, independent of the motivation that gave rise to their activation (for a review, see Wyer & Xu, 2010). In a similar vein, we predict that when a climactic interruption prevents the attainment of closure in the interrupted domain, the resulting unsatisfied need for psychological closure can spill over onto behavior in other domains and impact decisions unrelated to the interrupted activity. Specifically, given that a need for closure motivates individuals to make a decision rather than remain in a state of

ambiguity (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994), we predict that an interruption can increase the likelihood that an individual will make a purchase decision rather than continue examining product alternatives.

Overview

We present four studies investigating the effect of interruptions on subsequent behavior. Study 1 examines the effect of the timing of the interruption of a focal activity on the likelihood of making closure-associated purchase decisions in a different domain. Studies 2A and 2B explore the mechanism driving this effect. Finally, Study 3 examines whether climactic interruptions can impact real choice behavior and explores post-choice need for psychological closure.

Study 1

The purpose of Study 1 is to document the basic effect of interruptions increasing the pursuit of closure-associated decisions in an unrelated domain. Making a purchase decision provides closure to a product search (e.g., Vermeir, Van Kenhove, & Hendrickx, 2002). Thus, we examine whether individuals who are unable to complete an interrupted activity are more likely to make purchase decisions than uninterrupted individuals. In addition, we explore the necessary conditions for the effect to occur—chiefly, we predict that only interruptions which disrupt the climactic moments of an activity increase the pursuit of closure-associated decisions.

Method

Eighty-seven participants from an online pool were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In the *Control* condition, participants watched a short comedy clip in which a comedian relayed a childhood anecdote that culminated in a final joke. In the *Climax Interruption* condition, participants watched the same clip but experienced a video-malfunction immediately prior to the punch line of the comedian's joke. In the *Non-Climax Interruption* condition, participants watched the same clip but experienced a video-malfunction during a non-climactic moment of the comedian's anecdote, several seconds before the introduction of the final joke.

In an ostensibly unrelated study, participants were then instructed to imagine that they were shopping for several consumer products (e.g., luggage, cake, etc.). Participants were presented with the specifications of two items in each of five product categories, and were asked to imagine that these were the first two items that they encountered while shopping for the products online. Next, participants were asked to indicate whether they would be more likely to purchase one of the two presented items, or whether they would be more likely to continue looking for alternatives. Participants read that they would not actually need to continue examining product alternatives as part of the study, and that they should simply report what they would choose to do if they were in the described situation. Participants reported their choices by selecting a radio

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