

Marketing

Shopping the way to my goals: an analysis of purchase impact on perceived goal progress

*Rumo aos meus objetivos via compras: uma análise do impacto de compras na percepção de progresso em objetivos**Hacia mis metas por medio de las compras: análisis del impacto de las compras en la percepción de progreso hacia objetivos*Manuela Albornoz Gonçalves^{a,*}, Walter Nique^b, Dilney Albornoz Gonçalves^c^a Universidade Feevale, Novo Hamburgo, RS, Brazil^b Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil^c IE Business School, Madrid, Spain

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of goal related purchases on goal progress perception, and whether this perception depends on the strength of association between product and goal. To test how consumers perceive the act of purchasing goal-related products, three experiments were conducted in an online setting. Participants exposed to purchasing situations perceived greater goal progress than participants exposed to usage situation or a control group. In addition, studies show that this effect is a result of strength of association between product and goal, since participants exposed to more instrumental products perceived greater goal progress than participants exposed to less instrumental products. Therefore, these studies demonstrate how consumers interpret goal related purchases, and the mechanism that influences this interpretation.

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Keywords: Purchases; Goal progress; Motivation; Consumer behavior; Self-regulation

Resumo

Nesta pesquisa busca-se avançar no conhecimento de progresso em objetivos ao analisar como as compras são percebidas pelos consumidores em relação a seus objetivos. Ela busca verificar se a compra de um produto relacionado a um objetivo faz com que o consumidor perceba progresso no mesmo e se essa percepção de progresso depende da força de associação do produto com o objetivo. Para testar os objetivos propostos, realizaram-se três experimentos *online*. Esses experimentos mostram que os participantes expostos a situações de compra de produtos relacionados a um objetivo, percebem maior progresso no objetivo do que os participantes expostos a uma situação de uso ou ao grupo de controle. Ainda, os estudos explicam

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que isso ocorre devido à força de associação dos produtos com os objetivos, uma vez que os participantes expostos aos grupos com produtos mais instrumentais ao objetivo perceberam maior progresso do que os participantes com produtos menos instrumentais ao objetivo. Portanto, essa pesquisa mostra teórica e empiricamente como consumidores interpretam compras relacionadas a seus objetivos e o mecanismo que influencia essa interpretação.

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Palavras-chave: Compras; Progresso em objetivos; Motivação; Comportamento do consumidor; Autoregulação

Resumen

En este estudio se busca avanzar en el conocimiento acerca del progreso en objetivos al analizar cómo las compras son percibidas por los consumidores en relación con sus metas. Se verifica si la compra de un producto relacionado con un objetivo hace que el consumidor tenga la percepción de progreso en este objetivo y si tal percepción depende de la fuerza de asociación del producto con el objetivo. Para poner a prueba las hipótesis propuestas, se han llevado a cabo tres experimentos *online*. Los resultados muestran que los participantes presentados a situaciones de compra de productos relacionados con un objetivo perciben un mayor progreso hacia la meta que aquellos participantes expuestos a una situación de uso o al grupo de control. Además, los estudios indican que esto ocurre debido a la fuerza de asociación del producto con el objetivo, dado que los participantes expuestos a los grupos que contaban con productos más instrumentales al objetivo han percibido mayor progreso que los participantes con productos menos instrumentales al objetivo. Por tanto, este estudio demuestra teórica y empíricamente cómo los consumidores interpretan las compras relacionadas con sus objetivos y el mecanismo que influye en esta interpretación.

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Palabras clave: Compras; Progreso en las metas; Motivación; Comportamiento del consumidor; Autorregulación

Introduction

People are constantly establishing and pursuing goals. These goals can be specific and attained with one or a few actions – like baking a cake – or they can be ongoing goals that require constant investment of resources, such as time and effort, like saving for retirement.

Sometimes the pursuit of ongoing goals is not an easy task, especially because individuals tend to have multiple goals that are often contradictory at the same time, for example, a consumer may want to save money for retirement and, at the same time, may want to enjoy a vacation in the Caribbean.

The application of resources such as time and effort in the pursuit of ongoing goals depends on personality traits (Fishbach & Shah, 2006) and context (Zhang, Fishbach, & Kruglanski, 2007). Moreover, individuals' financial resources are limited to budget constraints. It is known that, when these budget constraints allow people to invest money in the pursuit of goals, they will generally do it and, furthermore, they will seem insensitive to the amount invested (Simonson & Dhar, 1999). Thus, many consumers invest their money in products that serve to attain a certain goal. However, anecdotal evidence and common sense suggest that consumers often buy products that they do not use.

Previous research on consumer choice (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005) shows that individuals have multiple and even conflicting goals. Actions taken in goal pursuit can be interpreted in terms of goal progress and/or goal commitment (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005). When consumers interpret an action as commitment, they tend to make subsequent choices that are congruent with the goal at hand. However, when consumers perceive their action as progress toward the goal, they tend to make goal-incongruent subsequent decisions. In this research, we propose that consumers interpret goal related purchases as goal progress, even

though ownership of the product itself does not guarantee goal progress. Moreover, we hypothesize that this happens even when progress is only attained by using a product.

Although Fishbach and Dhar (2005) have evaluated consumers' subsequent choices after goal-oriented actions, to the best of our knowledge, no studies evaluated how consumers make these goal progress inferences. This article aims to verify whether people are capable of perceiving purchases associated with an ongoing goal as goal progress. In addition, we seek to study whether the perception of progress depends on the strength of association between product and goal, based on goal systems theory (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Huang & Zhang, 2011; Kruglanski et al., 2002; Zhang & Huang, 2010).

Goal systems theory (Kruglanski et al., 2002) states that goals are mental representations interconnected with their means of attainment. This cognitive motivation theory states that goals are the desired end-state that people want to achieve. These goals are connected to the means that are associated with their achievement as in a network (Kruglanski et al., 2002). The means for attaining a goal are any perceived activities, events or circumstances seen as likely to contribute to the attainment of a goal (Shah & Kruglanski, 2003). These means may vary as to how much they contribute to the attainment of the goal. For example, a person wanting to learn Mandarin could watch a Chinese movie or spend a year living in China. While the former may contribute the goal, the latter is likely to contribute even more. As a result, it is also likely to have a stronger association to the goal. The greater the strength of association between goal and means, the greater the perceived instrumentality of the means (Shah & Kruglanski, 2003; Zhang, Fishbach, & Kruglanski, 2007).

This article aims to contribute to the goal progress theory in two ways: (1) by testing how consumers interpret goal-related purchases, and (2) by examining the role of the product-goal

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