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Consumer goal pursuit

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Consumers pursue goals when they perform behaviors (e.g., purchase low-calorie food) in order to achieve a desired end state (e.g., lose weight). Recent goal pursuit research can be classified into two streams of thought: conscious and unconscious goal pursuit. Conscious goal pursuit occurs when consumers are aware of the goal, while unconscious goal pursuit occurs when consumers are not aware of the goal, but still perform behaviors to achieve it. After discussing recent findings on when each type is more effective in helping consumers achieve their goals, I conclude that future research should not investigate the conscious and unconscious systems separately. Rather, future work should use a cooperative approach focused on how these systems interact to influence consumer goal pursuit.

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Consumer goal pursuit occurs when a consumer buys a product in order to reach a desired end state [1–3]. This end state can take many forms. A consumer who wants to be healthy may buy vegetables at the supermarket, while a consumer who wants to impress others may buy nice clothes at a high-end store. Consumer psychology has seen an enormous amount of research in the past ten years investigating goal pursuit [4–6]. This interest reflects the important role of goals as determinants of consumer behavior, and also a broad interest in how to help consumers achieve goals associated with self-control (e.g., losing weight, saving money). A recent paper [7] indicates that the words “goal pursuit” and “self-control” are amongst the most used words in the period of 2004–2014 in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, one of the leading journals in consumer research.

The development of consumer goal pursuit research has resulted in two parallel streams of investigation, namely

conscious and unconscious goal pursuit. During conscious goal pursuit, an individual is aware that a goal is active [8,9]. During unconscious goal pursuit, an individual is not aware that a goal is active [10,11]. For example, a sign about healthy eating may lead a consumer to choose vegetables over cookies while grocery shopping without being aware that the goal to eat healthy was activated by the sign. This distinction became important because pursuing goals was initially believed to require conscious awareness, as it was hard to believe people could work toward a desired end state without knowing the desire was there. Advances in research thinking and methods, which began to attribute more importance to unconscious processes in general, led researchers to raise the idea that consumers could also pursue goals unconsciously.

This article reviews recent consumer research on conscious and unconscious goal pursuit. This review will demonstrate that one type need not lead to more successful goal pursuit (i.e., more self-control) than the other. Rather, each has characteristics that can help consumers pursue their goals in different situations. As such, both conscious and unconscious goal pursuit can contribute to consumer well-being.

Conscious goal pursuit

Models of conscious goal pursuit investigate situations in which consumers are aware that a goal is active, consider feedback about their performance (“Am I doing well with regards to achieving the goal?”), and use the feedback to plan subsequent behavior [12–15]. For instance, if a consumer has a goal to lose 10 pounds, the consumer will evaluate current performance (e.g., “I have lost 7 pounds so far”) and decide how much effort (e.g., diet, exercising) they should still exert in order to achieve the goal [16•]. Therefore, inferences consumers make about their performance can have a significant impact on subsequent motivation to pursue the goal. Several recent findings shed light on how these inferences influence conscious goal pursuit.

One type of inference is that of goal progress. Some findings indicate that the less progress there is toward a goal, the more motivated people are to pursue the goal [17,18,19•]. For example, when people who were not yet committed to a donation campaign were told about a goal of raising \$10,000, presenting information about how much still had to be donated led to the perception that not enough progress had been made, which increased motivation to donate [20]. Other findings, however, indicate that the perception that one has made progress toward a goal can be motivating. For example, people

who were closer to achieving the goal of a loyalty program (e.g., had bought several cups of coffee in order to get a free coffee) made purchases more frequently, which indicates higher motivation to pursue the goal [21–23]. While less is known about the specific instances in which progress will be motivating or demotivating, it is clear that inferences of progress can largely influence conscious goal pursuit.

Another widely investigated inference is attainability. Consumers are more motivated the more possible they think it is to attain a goal [24^{*}]. When consumers perceive they may not be able to attain a goal, these perceptions may lead to disengagement from the goal [25], or at least a revision to a goal that is easier to attain [26]. On the contrary, when consumers perceive that they will be able to attain a goal, these perceptions may keep them engaged with the goal, which explains some of the findings showing that goal progress (i.e., being at a late goal pursuit stage) increases motivation to pursue a goal [27]. These findings on the influence of goal progress and attainability suggest that, because a conscious goal involves a target goal to be met, inferences consumers make about where they are with regards to that target are the main drivers of motivation.

While inferences about goal progress and attainability have dominated recent goal pursuit research, a series of other studies indicate that many factors influence a consumer's ability to consciously pursue a goal. These factors include whether consumers want to attain a goal target or maintain their current goal state [28], consumers' ability to visualize the goal [29], attention to goal-related stimuli [30], whether pursuit will occur in the present or in the future [31], whether there are interruptions to goal pursuit [32], and the impact that steps toward or away from the goal have on motivation to pursue it [33]. I next examine a different type of goal pursuit, which occurs when consumers are not aware that a goal is active.

Unconscious goal pursuit

Models of unconscious goal pursuit investigate situations in which the environment activates goals without consumers' awareness, which leads consumers to choose behaviors that are consistent with the unconsciously activated goal [34,35]. For instance, a consumer who goes grocery shopping may be exposed to store materials which say "start eating well today." Without being aware of the material and that it has activated a healthy eating goal, the consumer may proceed to make healthier choices during their supermarket trip. Several recent findings shed light on how environmental stimuli influence unconscious goal pursuit.

This stream of investigation initially examined whether people can unconsciously pursue goals in the market place, as the literature on unconscious goal pursuit had mostly been developed outside of the consumer domain.

This research found that being exposed to brands associated with saving money led research participants to pick a good-value over a high-end gift for their participation in an experiment [36]. Exposure to words associated with health (e.g., fit, slim, shame) increased choices of healthy over tasty snacks [37]. Exposure to words associated with fun led to increased choices of casual over fancy restaurants [38]. Exposure to the American flag led to higher choice of Coca-Cola over Pepsi [39]. Following these demonstrations, which included evidence that unconscious goals were actually active and people were unaware of them [40], as well as evidence that they could have effects on people's everyday behaviors [41], there have been several attempts to explain unconscious goal pursuit.

Explaining the processes behind unconscious goal pursuit typically involves the manipulation of variables that lead consumers to not behave consistently with the activated goal. These moderators have the potential to show whether consumers merely follow goals suggested by the environment or, alternatively, that the unconscious system has mechanism to defend itself from unwanted influences. One of the manipulated variables is the novelty of the consumer context. When facing a novel choice, such as buying a gift for a professor, students did not behave in accordance with an unconsciously activated goal, showing that whether unconscious goal pursuit takes place depends on the choice context [38]. When the situation is novel, the unconscious system seems to protect itself from external influences, and not follow an activated goal. A second variable is the extent to which consumers perceive that their immediate environment is trying to persuade them to perform a behavior. When consumers were exposed to stimuli clearly designed to persuade them, such as brand slogans suggesting they should spend money, they did not follow the activated goal, and actually spent less money in an unrelated purchase [42^{*}]. In a similar fashion, people unconsciously react against the goals suggested by their significant other when they perceive that their significant other is a controlling person [43]. A third variable is the match between the unconsciously activated goal and people's personality. Congruent with the idea that unconscious goals may not always produce behavior that is consistent with the goal, unconsciously activating the goal to attend a party made introverts less likely to choose arousing products, such as a dance music CD [44]. These findings indicate that goals activated by environmental stimuli can have an unconscious effect on consumer behavior, but that consumers are not defenseless against these influences. Consumers are able to behave consistently or inconsistently with the activated goal, depending on the context or individual characteristics.

In addition to studying the processes responsible for unconscious goal pursuit, recent research has started to investigate how activated goals may operate in tandem with other variables that are present in the market place.

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