

Research Article

The road traveled, the road ahead, or simply on the road? When progress framing affects motivation in goal pursuit[☆]

Jacob H. Wiebenga^{a,*}, Bob M. Fennis^{a,b}

^a University of Groningen, The Netherlands

^b Norwegian Business School BI, Oslo, Norway

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Abstract

The present research examined the dynamic interplay between the framing of one's progress from an initial state toward an end state (i.e., framed as the distance traveled from the initial state to the current state -'to-date' versus framed as the distance left from the current state to the end state -'to-go') and construal level in influencing motivation in goal pursuit. In three experiments we found that both state and chronic differences in experienced construal level modulate the impact of progress framing on motivation at a specific stage in goal pursuit, i.e., when consumers are halfway between the initial and end state, but is less consequential at the initial or end stages. This modulation shows that type of framing only affected motivation of people with an abstract, but not a concrete mindset. Under these conditions, progress framed in terms of to-date produced increased motivation compared to a to-go frame. Moreover, perceived goal distance was found to mediate the impact of progress framing on motivation for individuals with an abstract, but not a concrete mindset.

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1. Introduction

Documented commercial loyalty programs have a history of at least 150 years. One of the very first loyalty programs is thought to originate from the B.A. Babbit Company that launched a program in 1852, where consumers could collect points found inside soap packages (Lonto, 2004). Today's equivalent might well be the smartphone-based loyalty app Shopkick which is used for essentially the same objective: to collect points (i.e., Kicks) to be redeemed for various rewards. Although most loyalty programs clearly differ in executional style and rewards offered, one thing they all have in common—similar to most other goal pursuit settings—is that they provide information about the consumer's progress in the attainment of the reward. How to do that as

effectively and efficiently as possible has challenged marketers throughout the ages. For instance, the Esso Extra program depicts its members' progress in terms of how many points they *still need* to collect in order to attain a certain gift, which they term 'the road to reward'. Shell on the other hand focuses on the number of points (i.e., Air Miles) members have *already* collected, i.e., on the road traveled. Do these subtle differences in how to present progress information matter for consumer motivation in goal pursuit? The question is pertinent given that studies indicate that while many consumers sign-up for loyalty programs, a substantial percentage (approximately 75–80%; Capizzi & Ferguson, 2005) drops out about halfway the process. In the present paper, we will address this issue. More specifically, we will focus on how and when such cues on the road traveled versus the road ahead affect consumer motivation at various stages of the goal pursuit process. Moreover, we assess the role of consumers' construal level in this process and will demonstrate that this construct allows for another way in which progress cues can be perceived, i.e., as simply being on the road. In short, we will assess when and how the framing of progress information affects motivation in goal pursuit from the

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* Corresponding author at: Department of Marketing, University of Groningen, P.O. Box 800, 9700AV, Groningen, The Netherlands. Fax: +31 50 363 8252.

E-mail address: j.h.wiebenga@rug.nl (J.H. Wiebenga).

initial to the end state of the goal pursuit process, and when it is largely inconsequential in doing so.

2. Goal striving and progress information

Most behavior starts with goal setting through which consumers get involved in goal pursuit (Locke & Latham, 1990). After this initial step progress toward these goals is monitored (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005, 2008). This is an essential aspect of goal striving as it enables consumers to adjust their efforts in pursuing goals, or to (temporarily) disengage from further efforts. Progress can be conceived as the distance traveled from the initial state to the current state (i.e., a ‘to-date’ frame) and/or the remaining distance from the current state toward the end state (i.e., a ‘to-go’ frame; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Koo & Fishbach, 2008). Hence, progress in for instance a customer loyalty program can be defined in to-date terms as ‘credits collected’ or in to-go terms as ‘remaining credits’.

Several studies have focused on how to-go information about what remains to be done affects consumer motivation. In particular, research on the classic ‘goal-gradient hypothesis’ (Hull, 1932), also termed ‘goal looms larger effect’ (Brendl & Higgins, 1996), or ‘work-completion hypothesis’ (Garland & Conlon, 1998), suggests that motivation increases as people near their goal (Förster, Higgins, & Idson, 1998; Kivetz, Urminsky, & Zheng, 2006). Conversely, studies on the effects of a to-date frame have shown that increased distance from the initial state fosters motivation to pursue a focal goal (e.g., Arkes & Blumer, 1985; Cialdini, Trost, & Newsom, 1995; Staw, 1976). Both streams of literature are united in a dual-source view of motivation where motivation is jointly determined by the expectancy of reaching a goal and the goal’s value (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Huang, Zhang, & Broniarczyk, 2012; Koo & Fishbach, 2008). According to this view, motivational strength increases as one approaches goal attainment (i.e., when remaining goal distance decreases), and/or when higher goal value is inferred from accomplished goal actions (i.e., when distance travelled increases). This particularly holds in a single goal pursuit context, when there is one focal goal, as increasing motivation then produces greater overall success (i.e., a goal gradient effect; Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2010; Kivetz et al., 2006). In a multiple goal pursuit context however, it can sometimes be beneficial to take the foot off the accelerator when the focal goal nears and goal attainment is high, as success can then be maximized by focusing on other, less progressed goals (i.e., a coasting effect; Carver & Scheier, 1998; see also Fishbach & Dhar, 2008; Koo & Fishbach, 2008; Louro, Pieters, & Zeelenberg, 2007).

Although a to-date and to-go frame imply one another (more progress from the initial state means less distance to the end state) and thus are logically equivalent, the previous research suggests that their impact on motivation in goal pursuit is dependent on the reference point used to describe progress (Karevold & Teigen, 2010; Koo & Fishbach, 2012). Recent studies show that progress framing particularly affects motivation at the beginning and end of goal pursuit, because then movement from the start and toward the end is most noticeable and hence motivating. In contrast, when people have progressed about halfway toward a goal,

progress information is deemed to be less diagnostic and, as a result, progress framing is assumed to be less consequential for goal pursuit motivation, a phenomenon labeled the ‘stuck-in-the-middle effect’ (Bonezzi, Brendl, & De Angelis, 2011; Koo & Fishbach, 2012). For instance, Bonezzi et al. (2011) showed that progress framing did not affect participants’ willingness to donate money to charity when the current level of progress toward the charity goal (i.e., to reach a total of \$300 worth in donations) was halfway (i.e., \$150) compared to when progress was close to the end state (i.e., \$245) or just under way (i.e., \$55). Similarly, when loyalty program members were halfway collecting a reward, they were more likely to relax goal pursuit compared to the beginning or end situation (Touré-Tillery & Fishbach, 2012).

The previous findings suggest that—particularly in a single goal pursuit context—progress framing is mainly influential for motivation at the beginning and end of the goal pursuit process, but appears largely inconsequential when consumers have progressed halfway in goal attainment. However, in the present research we argue there is ample reason to reconsider this ‘stuck-in-the-middle effect’ and to forward that there are specific conditions, unaccounted for in previous studies, under which progress information is highly consequential even in this middle stage of goal pursuit. In short, the present paper builds on previous research by examining *when* and *how* progress cues affect motivation in goal pursuit throughout the goal pursuit process. We show in three experiments that such cues not only matter at the initial and end stages, but that halfway goal pursuit directional effects of progress framing on motivation are still observable, particularly when people’s mindset promotes construing such information in relation to reference points that are distant from the here and now. Additionally, we propose and demonstrate that such a mindset is less consequential in modulating the impact of progress framing at the beginning and end of goal pursuit. A better understanding of the effects of progress information in these various stages promotes a more comprehensive insight in the dynamics of goal pursuit throughout the entire goal striving process. Moreover, it sheds light on the psychological processes that play a role in the large ‘grey’ area in the middle between start and finish that has received relatively little research attention.

3. Progress information and construal level

In essence, information on goal progress, either presented as work done, or as remaining work, can only be perceived as diagnostic when it is construed in relation to an initial state that is removed from the presence and some future end state that is not yet attained. Information on progress may affect motivation in goal pursuit, because it informs consumers on the already covered and still remaining distance and thus on the attainability of the end state and on the goal-congruent investments already made in order to attain it (e.g., Fishbach & Dhar, 2008; Koo & Fishbach, 2008). However, in order to be informative this requires consumers to actively relate cues about where they are now to an initial state and/or to an end state, both of which are distant from the here and now in a temporal, physical,

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