Research Article

The effects of goal progress cues: An implicit theory perspective

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Abstract

Consumers often encounter goods and services that provide cues to mark their progress. We define the term "goal progress cues" to reflect the diverse category of cues that highlight progress towards a goal. Across a series of three studies, we show that entity theorists, who rely on cues that highlight completion in order to signal their abilities to others, evaluate tasks that include these cues more favorably than those that lack these features. In contrast, incremental theorists, who focus on improving competence, are impacted only by progress cues that highlight learning. We demonstrate these findings across a variety of goal pursuit contexts that represent a mix of customer-centric (retail queues), service-oriented managerial (sales calls), and personal achievement consumer product (mazes) domains using both behavioral and self-reported measures. We conclude with a discussion about the theoretical and substantive implications of our findings.
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Introduction

Daily life is filled with cues that highlight the progress of consumption of goods and services at various points along the consumption journey. For instance, dieting programs are specifically designed with tracking mechanisms to highlight goal progress. Consumer loyalty programs provide progress markers for the purchase and consumption of a wide-range of goods from airline trips to cups of coffee. Even Disney parks provide wait time estimates so that customers can track their physical and temporal movement along the attraction's queue. Perhaps most obvious are the plethora of technology products that make the consumption journey salient to their users, such as e-book readers that display a continually updated percentage of the book read. We define the term "goal progress cues" to reflect the diverse category of cues that highlight progress towards a goal. The specific cues studied to date in the goal progress literature (goal visualization: Cheema & Bagchi, 2011; progress bars: Koo & Fishbach, 2010a; physical movement in a retail queue: Koo & Fishbach, 2010b) are all subsets of this larger, more inclusive category of goal progress cues that indicate progress towards the completion of the task.

The growing prevalence of these goal progress cues warrants a systematic examination of factors that may impact their downstream effects. In this research, we suggest that the effects of goal progress cues may not be uniform for all individuals. Specifically, we suggest that an individual's implicit theory of change (Levy, Stroessner, & Dweck, 1998; Plaks, Grant, & Dweck, 2005) serves as an important determinant of how such cues impact goal pursuit, achievement, and satisfaction. We show that entity theorists, who believe in the immutability of the world, infer validation of their abilities from progress feedback. As a result, entity theorists favor goal pursuit with tasks that include goal progress cues and evaluate such tasks more favorably than those that lack these features. In contrast, incremental theorists, who believe in changeability of the self and others, are focused on improving their abilities, and are hence, unaffected by goal

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progress cues that highlight the extent to which a task has been completed.

Conceptual development

Implicit theory

Research has identified two types of implicit theories that individuals endorse: entity and incremental. Individuals who have an entity theory orientation tend to view people, events, and objects in relatively fixed, unchanging terms (Plaks et al., 2005) and are driven by an aim to "gain favorable judgments" (also called performance goals; Elliot & Dweck, 1988). Individuals who have an incremental theory orientation tend to possess a more dynamic and flexible view (Plaks et al., 2005) and are driven by an aim to "increase their competence" (also called learning goals; Elliot & Dweck, 1988). Implicit theories can be measured as chronic orientations (Levy et al., 1998), but can also be temporarily primed using external stimuli such as television shows, movie clips, and conventional marketing tools such as print advertisements (Jain, Mathur, & Maheswaran, 2009).

Implicit theory orientation is emerging as an important individual difference variable in the consumer behavior domain, impacting several downstream variables such as evaluations of marketing messages (Jain et al., 2009), brand activity (Mathur, Jain, & Maheswaran, 2012), and consumption behavior (Park & John, 2010). For instance, consumers' responses to persuasive messages are shown to differ in accord with their implicit theory orientation (Jain et al., 2009). Mathur et al. (2012) have shown that consumers' implicit theories impact their brand extension acceptance. Consumers' implicit theory has also been shown to impact the use of brands with certain attributes (Park & John, 2010). Thus, a growing body of research supports the posit that the impact of implicit theories of change on consumer behavior is far-reaching and pervasive. As discussed below, we add to this growing literature by demonstrating that implicit theory orientation also influences evaluations of goal oriented tasks in retail, services, and consumer products domains.

Implicit theory and goal progress cues

Extant research has emphasized an individual's implicit theory orientation as a determinant of whether the person focuses on gaining favorable judgments or improving competence during goal pursuit (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). In general, entity theorists, who have performance goals (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), focus on "seeking to maintain positive judgments of their ability," (Elliot & Dweck, 1988, p 5). Hence, entity theorists seek cues and situations that imply favorable inferences about their competence and provide flattering external evidence and signals of their capabilities (Ommundsen, 2001; Tabarnero & Wood, 1999, p 107). As a result, entity theorists tend to prefer tasks and experiences that signal complimentary outcomes and advantageous judgment. This general tendency of entity theorists has been robustly evidenced in social and cognitive behavioral domains, and more recently revealed in consumption behavior in the market place. For example, Park and John (2010) have shown

that entity theorists prefer products with prominent luxury logos which serve as favorable signals of desirable traits because "entity theorists perceive the self in a more positive way through opportunities to signal positive qualities to the self or others" (Park & John, 2010, p 656). Along similar lines, entity theorists have also been shown to systematically prefer advertising appeals that focus on a brand's signaling ability (versus the brand's self-improvement ability; Park & John, 2012). Based on this nascent literature, we suggest that goal progress cues that highlight the extent to which a task has been completed serve as similar external self-affirmation signals for entity theorists.

Indeed, goal progress cues that point to the extent to which a task has been completed have been shown to provide meaningful feedback about progress to goal pursuers. For instance, Cheema and Bagchi (2011) have shown that external representations of progress, such as the approaching wall of a pool for a swimmer swimming laps, or progress bars depicting the progress made during a task, enhance goal pursuit. Similar effects have been recorded for other external representations of progress towards completing a task, such as physical movement (Koo & Fishbach, 2010b). Amir and Ariely (2008) have shown in a video game setting that progress bars that indicate the extent of a task completed impact both task evaluations and performance in that level of the video game. Therefore, we suggest that goal progress cues that represent progress towards completing a task are perceived favorably by entity theorists because for them, explicit representation of progress towards completion serves as a proxy for achievement and provides external validation of their competence. Thus, entity theorists are likely to favorably evaluate tasks that include such completion cues.

In contrast, incremental theorists strive to *improve* their competence on the task, "are concerned with developing their ability," and are not motivated to simply relay favorable competence information about themselves to others (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliot & Dweck, 1988, p 5). Because incremental theorists are known to self-monitor progress towards accomplishing the goal (Dweck & Leggett, 1988, p 258), external cues such as goal progress cues that provide progress information towards completion are unlikely to carry meaning and relevance for incremental theorists. Therefore, the presence or absence of completion cues should not matter to incremental theorists.

Thus, if our theorizing is correct, we should expect entity theorists, as compared to incremental theorists, to prefer tasks that include cues that provide representation of progress towards completing a task. We would also expect entity theorists to prefer tasks that include goal progress cues in comparison to tasks that lack these cues, while incremental theorists should be unaffected by the presence or absence of goal progress cues. Stated formally:

H1a. Entity (vs. incremental) theorists will evaluate tasks more favorably in the presence of goal progress cues that highlight completion.

H1b. Entity theorists will evaluate tasks that include completion goal progress cues more favorably than tasks that do not include such cues.