

Research Article

# Committing under the shadow of tomorrow: Self-control and commitment to future virtuous behaviors

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## Abstract

Individuals acknowledge the importance of engaging in virtuous behaviors, but find them difficult. Past research suggests that a distant-future focus may result in more commitment. This research demonstrates that, for certain consumers, distant-future execution timing may discourage commitment. Specifically, whereas low self-control consumers are indeed more likely to commit to distant-future behaviors, high self-control consumers are more likely to commit to near-future behaviors. This is demonstrated when commitment does not hold a cost (study 1), but also when it does (study 2). Consumers' time availability certainty underlies the effect: Low self-control consumers feel more certain that in the distant future they will be able to identify the time necessary to fulfill their commitments, whereas high self-control consumers feel more certain regarding their ability to identify their available time in the near future (studies 3a–3b). The effect is shown to occur only when the commitment's time of execution reflects different levels of time concreteness: The effect is eliminated among consumers who perceive the near and distant future as equally concrete or abstract (study 4).

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“Unless commitment is made, there are only promises and hopes; but no plans.”

[Peter F. Drucker]

## Introduction

When people pre-commit to a certain behavior, they are likely to be motivated to act upon their initial intentions and engage in that behavior. This is why, in today's competitive world, marketers frequently use a “foot in the door” strategy to convince consumers to commit to their specific products or services (Freedman & Fraser, 1966). Commitment is likely to be particularly important in the case of socially desirable, so-called “virtuous” behaviors which benefit the self or others, such as sticking to a financial budget or volunteering at a charitable organization. These behaviors often demand effort and hence tend to be difficult to carry out. Therefore, committing to such behaviors serves as a necessary first step.

The current research aims to study one set of factors that may influence intent to commit to virtuous behaviors. More specifically, this research tests whether (a) committing to virtuous behaviors is influenced by the extent to which the behavior is to occur in the near or distant future, and (b) whether that process is affected by the individual's level of self-control. Past research has demonstrated that when individuals focus on the distant future they are more likely to think about end-states and desired outcomes; hence, a distant-future focus seems likely to encourage commitment to virtuous behavior (e.g., Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006; Nenkov, Inman, & Hulland, 2008; Rogers & Bazerman, 2008). However, it is possible that for some people a focus on the distant, and therefore more hazy, future may demotivate commitment, and that these individuals may be more likely to commit to virtuous behaviors that are scheduled to take place in the near rather than the distant future.

It is argued here that self-control will moderate individuals' willingness to commit to temporally near or distant virtuous behaviors. In particular, this research is based on the expectation that individuals with low self-control will be

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more willing to commit to the distant future because it seems more abstract. For these individuals, a remote, vague time of execution may create the illusion of flexibility and a sense of confidence that they will be able to find the necessary time when needed—that almost anything can be “squeezed in” between other tasks and commitments. In contrast, for these individuals, the more concrete nature of the near future may provoke thoughts about competing demands on their time and a sense that their schedule is neither free nor flexible. Individuals with high self-control, on the other hand, will be more likely to commit to the near future because it seems more concrete. They are likely to feel a sense of confidence that they will be able to find the necessary free time when needed if their schedule is pre-defined. For such individuals, the vague and abstract nature of the more remote future makes it more difficult to think about how and when a new task can be scheduled and completed.

In four studies, the research presented here examines how different individuals differ in their propensity to commit to virtuous behaviors in the near versus the distant future, and whether this propensity varies according to individual levels of self-control. Further, the research tests whether this propensity is driven by time availability certainty, which is individuals’ confident of finding the necessary spare time in the distant—and therefore vague, abstract, and undefined—future, or in the near, more concrete future. All studies share the assumption that nearly everyone appreciate the importance of behaving virtuously and, however busy, can find or make time for these behaviors to at least some extent.

## Conceptual background

### *Commitment to virtuous behavior*

Virtuous behaviors are behaviors that people believe they ought to do, but might find somewhat difficult, time-consuming, or effortful (Ein-Gar, Goldenberg, & Sagiv, 2012; Read, Loewenstein, & Kalyanaraman, 1999; Wertebroch, 1998). Virtuous behaviors can benefit the self (e.g., maintaining a healthy diet, joining a professional development coaching program, or sticking to a workout plan at the gym) or others (e.g., volunteering to help the needy or supporting a social action or environmental group). Because such behaviors are discretionary and demand effort, making the first step toward engagement in such behaviors is crucial. Research suggests that pre-committing to a given virtuous behavior makes people more likely to act upon their initial intentions (Freedman & Fraser, 1966). Such commitment entails looking at the future from one’s current standpoint and taking an action in the present that creates an obligation for the future. The future-oriented nature of this commitment means that the question of temporal distance—specifically, whether the behavior is to take place in the relatively near or distant future—may play an important role in people’s decisions to commit.

### *Execution time distance and commitment to virtuous behavior*

The relationship between time focus and virtuous behavior has been discussed in the literature from several standpoints, all

of which seem to suggest that a distant-future mindset is more likely to lead to virtuous behavior compared with a near-future mindset. For example, research on temporal construal theory (e.g., Dhar & Kim, 2007; Fujita et al., 2006; Yan & Sengupta, 2011), time perspective (e.g. Nenkov et al., 2008; Strathman, Gleicher, Boninger, & Edwards, 1994; Zimbardo, Keough, & Boyd, 1997), and goal attainment (e.g., Gollwitzer, 2003; Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2009; Myrseth & Fishbach, 2009; Myrseth, Fishbach, & Trope, 2009; Trope & Fishbach, 2000) has shown that individuals who focus on the distant future are more likely to engage in or commit to behaviors which can be characterized as virtuous (e.g. goal oriented behaviors) than individuals who focus on the near future. Furthermore, research on choice between “should” and “want” options shows that when execution of the choice is in the distant future, people are more likely to make a “should” choice (i.e., a virtuous choice) than when execution of the choice is in the near future (Milkman, Rogers, & Bazerman, 2010; Rogers & Bazerman, 2008). Finally, past research has also suggested that individuals perceive their spare time differently when considering their near or distant future. Specifically, Zauberman and Lynch (2005) showed that individuals believe they will have more spare time in the distant future than in the near future, and as a result are more willing to volunteer for future pro-social actions (virtuous behaviors) than for present pro-social actions.

Taken together, past research seems to converge on the notion that when the virtuous behavior is to take place in the distant future, individuals will adopt a distant future mindset and will be more likely to commit to virtuous behaviors than when the behavior is to take place in the near future. The current research suggests that, contrary to past findings, some individuals may be *less* likely to commit to distant-future virtuous behavior compared with near-future virtuous behavior. Thus, for some people a distant-future mindset might demotivate commitment to such behavior. It is further suggested that self-control may moderate the effect of temporal distance on commitment.

### *Self-control and commitment to near- versus distant-future virtuous behaviors*

A growing body of literature in psychology and marketing has investigated self-control as a high-order, stable attribute (notable examples include McCabe, Cunningham, & Brooks-Gunn, 2004; Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989; O’Gorman & Baxter, 2002; Turner & Piquero, 2002; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Interestingly, the literature has only begun to investigate the interacting effect of self-control and time focus on virtuous behavior. Early studies examined the direct relationship between self-control and virtuous behavior, wherein self-control predicted choice of a virtue over a vice option (Wertebroch, 1998). Later studies extended these findings to ongoing behavior in the form of consumption over time of virtuous products (Ein-Gar et al., 2012). Studies have also found that individuals with low self-control are more likely to procrastinate, than individuals with high self-control even with regard to behaviors that they recognize as

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