

## Counteractive Construal in Consumer Goal Pursuit

Consumers often face temptations in the pursuit of important long-term goals. Because the pursuit of such temptations potentially undermines the attainment of the goal, the presence of both the goal and temptation constitutes a self-control dilemma, which requires individuals to engage in self-control effort in order to maintain their goal pursuit (Aspinwall and Taylor 1997; Fishbach, Friedman, and Kruglanski 2003; Trope and Fishbach 2000). In this research, we propose a self-control mechanism, namely counteractive construal, that consumers employ to help them resist the temptation. Specifically, we propose that whenever consumers experience a conflict between a long-term goal and a short-term temptation, they augment the extent to which the temptation may undermine the goal attainment, thus are more likely to resist the temptation and resolve the self-control conflict in favor of the long-term goal.

Despite consumers' wish to perceive the world in an accurate and objective way, prior research has demonstrated that individuals' motivational states have a profound influence in shaping their perceptions and judgments (Baumeister and Newman 1994; Kunda 1990). Because one's perceptions and judgments are heavily influenced by their motivational states, it is possible that one's motivation to maintain their goal pursuit would potentially alter the construal and assessment of the options in this conflict (Fishbach, Shah, and Kruglanski 2004). In other words, one may help resolve the self-control conflict by augmenting the perceived cost of pursuing the temptation, such that it poses a greater threat to the attainment of the more important goal and would therefore be avoided.

Since we conceptualize counteractive construal as a self-control response designed to help individuals maintain their goal pursuit when facing a dilemma, we expect it to occur only when consumers experience the conflict between a long-term goal and a short-term temptation. The strength of the counteractive operation, accordingly, should depend on the intensity of the conflict: when the conflict is minimal, such as when the goal is unimportant, or the temptation is inaccessible, counteractive construal is unlikely to occur. Based on prior findings in the substitutability between self-control and external control, we further hypothesize that whenever there are externally imposed controls, counteractive construal becomes unnecessary because the external controls would be sufficient to ensure that the long-term goal would not be undermined by the temptation (Kruglanski et al. 2002; Tesser, Martin, and Cornell 1996). Because of the instrumental nature of counteractive construal, we further expect that it should only occur when self-control is effective in helping avoid the temptations. In situations where self-control is of no value in fending off the temptation, we expect no counteractive alterations in the construal of the temptation.

Three studies tested the present predictions. Across all studies, consumers faced a dilemma between succumbing to an immediately gratifying temptation and maintaining their goal pursuit, and we measured their perceptions of the tempting targets to test the counteractive construal hypothesis.

Study 1 and 2 tested whether consumers with (vs. without) an accessible dieting goal would construe tempting food items (cookies and drinks) to contain more calories, depending on whether they expected to have an opportunity to consume the tempting items or not. In study 1, we used a goal strength  $\times$  temptation availability (available vs. unavailable) two factor design,

where the temptation availability was manipulated as a between-subject factor and the strength of the dieting goal was measured as an individual difference factor. The dependent variable was the estimated calorie content in a piece of chocolate-chip cookie. We found that for participants who were told that they would have an option to take one cookie at the end of the study, the strength of their dieting goal positively predicted the amount of calories they perceived the cookie to contain. In contrast, for those who were not offered the option to take a cookie, there was no such relation.

Study 2 directly manipulated the accessibility of the dieting goal for participants and tested their construal of a tempting drink depending on whether they anticipated to have the option to consume the drink or not. We employed a 2 (dieting goal prime: yes vs. no)  $\times$  2 (temptation availability: available vs. unavailable) between-subject design. We manipulated the accessibility of participants' dieting goal by changing the settings of the small experiment room with three large posters depicting fit females or natural sceneries. The dependent variable was the estimated calorie content in a cup of sweetened soda. The results confirmed our hypothesis. For participants whose dieting goal was made accessible, they construed the soda to contain more calories when they expected it to be available for consumption than when they did not expect it to be available. However, when participants' dieting goal was not made accessible, the perceived amount of calories in the soda did not differ between those who expected to have an option to consume and those who did not.

Study 3 tested the hypothesis in a different context and included another dependent variable: participants' behavior intentions toward the temptation. We asked undergraduate participants to estimate the duration of a party when shown a flyer that invited them to a party either before or after they reported their desired GPA. We predicted that students who read the party invitation after reporting their desired GPA, in comparison to those who read the flyer before reporting their desired GPA, would experience a self-control conflict and expect the party to be longer, and in turn show lower interest in attending the party. The results showed the predicted goal strength  $\times$  self-control conflict interaction. When participants viewed the party flyer after answering the school-related questions, their desired GPA positively predicted the anticipated duration of the party. Such relation was not found among participants who viewed the party flyer before answering school related questions. In addition, for participants who experienced the self-control conflict between the academic goal and the tempting party, the estimated duration negatively predicted their intention to attend the party, whereas there was no such relation among participants who did not experience the self-control conflict.

In order to accomplish important long-term goals, consumers need to resist temptations, which are immediately gratifying yet costly to the goal attainment. The present research documented counteractive construal as a self-control mechanism that helps people resolve the conflict between a short-term temptation and a long-term goal. By perceptually increasing the cost of pursuing the temptation when experiencing such dilemma, consumers become more likely to avoid the temptation and maintain their goal pursuit.

## References

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