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Title: Out of control: impact of goal structure on personal control and implications for consumer judgments

Aim: This paper presents empirical foundations for the study of the effect of goal structure on consumer judgment through lack of personal control.

Methods: Three experiments were conducted.

Results: Our experiments indicate that mental representation of consumer goal does affect personal control in opposite direction according to goal structure, namely the representation of the focal goal from the related tasks and subtasks.

Conclusion: Because perceived order in one's environment primarily derives from personal control, when feelings of personal control are low, people should seek for structure and order their environment. Such an heuristics should affect consumer judgments by preferring strict categories when his/her goal is not structured, and at the opposite, by embracing the chaos in the means allowing goal pursuit when his/her goal is highly structured. This paper demonstrate that manipulation of goal structure (high vs. low) affects personal control in opposite directions.

Short abstract:

Perceived control is an important aspect of psychological functioning (Skinner 1996). It allows people to realize actions under the assumption that the produced outcomes will be the desired ones and the undesired ones will be avoided. But how can one expect to achieve the goal being pursued if one feels s/he has no control over it? This research is part of a larger project that argues that mental representation of goal structure might affect consumer judgments through lack of personal control. Such an heuristic implies that unstructured goals increase perception of randomness and chaos which the consumer seeks to compensate by seeking order in his/her environment. Because perceived order in one's environment primarily derives from personal control, when feelings of personal control are low, people should seek for structure and order their environment. However, when feelings of personal control are high (e.g., high structure of the goal being pursued), they should *embrace the chaos*, meaning that they should be more willing to accept unlikely categories of means to attain their goal. This research is a necessary step before further investigations on the impact of perceived control on consumer judgment could be pursued.

Long abstract:

Aim:

An extensive research in judgments and decision making suggests that the nature of the decision can depend on the cognitive processes that people employ in the course of making their decisions (Wyer 2011). In this paper, we argue that mental representation of goal structure might affect consumer judgments through lack of personal control.

Personal control is a basic human need and is formally defined as the extent to which oneself can intentionally produce desired outcomes and prevent undesired one from occurring (Skinner 1996). Kay et al. (2008) suggest that personal control may vary from a number of different reasons.

Among those reasons, we argue that mental representation of goal affects personal control in opposite direction according to its hierarchical structure. When goal structure is high – i.e., the overall goal is represented as a simple hierarchy of tasks – people should consider they can intentionally produce the desired outcomes and prevent the undesired ones. They might feel that they can order and plan the considered tasks. However, when goal structure is low – i.e., the overall goal is represented as a complex hierarchy of tasks and subtasks (Barsalou 1991) – they might feel that the current goal is imbued with randomness and chaos. Accordingly, level of personal control should be low.

Three experiments were conducted in order to provide empirical evidence for the assumption that mental representation of goal structure (low vs. high) differentially affects personal control.

Experiment 1

Twenty-nine students were recruited to perform a memory task manipulation that has been used to prime the salience of personal control in other research (Kay et al. 2008). We asked them to remember an important purchase they made that was a positive experience. The low and high structure conditions indicated respectively that the purchase required many or a few tasks. Research has suggested that variation in feelings of personal control can stem from variation in perception of self-certainty. Accordingly, participants were asked how well a set of 18 of traits described them (e.g., smart, incompetent). After each trait, they were asked how certain they were about their rating comparing to others on a 11-point scale (Wu and Yao 2007). Participants were then asked to indicate how much control they thought having during the positive purchase process they described at the beginning, on a 11-point scale (Kay et al. 2008).

Results revealed a significant effect of goal structure on personal control, , $U = 31.00$, $p < .01$, $r = -.55$ ($M_{\text{low structure}} = 6.00$ and $M_{\text{high structure}} = 8.29$) but none regarding self-certainty $U = 67.50$, $p = .26$ ($M_{\text{low structure}} = 7.05$ and $M_{\text{high structure}} = 7.60$). Such findings corroborates our assumption that goal structure affects feelings of personal control as we expected it would without affecting participants' perception of self-certainty.

Experiment 2

Twenty-one students performed a similar memory task but referring to an important purchase was a low-pleasure experience. We used the revised Causal Dimension Scale (CDSII) to

measure personal control on a 9-point scale. As we expected, effect of goal structure on personal control were significant, $U = 25.00$, $p = .04$, $r = -.45$ ($M_{\text{low structure}} = 3.19$ and $M_{\text{high structure}} = 5.19$).

Experiment 3

One could argue that the goal structure manipulation could affect related variables such as mood and self-esteem besides personal control. Accordingly, nineteen students performed the same goal structure manipulation used in experiment 2. Then they completed standard measures of mood (Watson et al. 1988) and self-esteem (Rosemberg 1979) for which the results were non-significant. These findings indicate that our manipulation of goal structure is indeed a specific threat to participants' sense of personal control.

Conclusion and implications for consumer judgments

These three experiments provide empirical evidence demonstrating that goals represented with low structure induce a lack of personal control. These results are the first step toward the study of the impact of goal structure on consumer judgments and decision making in terms of impact of need for order.

Because perceived order in one's environment primarily derives from personal control, when feelings of personal control are low, people should seek for structure and order their environment. Hence, they should seek for strict categories (e.g., brand and product categories). However, when feelings of personal control are high (e.g., high structure of the goal being pursued), they should *embrace the chaos*, meaning that they should be more willing to accept unlikely categories of means to attain their goal.

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