

The dynamics of consumer behavior: A goal systemic perspective

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Abstract

Like most behavior, consumer behavior too is goal driven. In turn, goals constitute cognitive constructs that can be chronically active as well as primed by features of the environment. Goal systems theory outlines the principles that characterize the dynamics of goal pursuit and explores their implications for consumer behavior. In this vein, we discuss from a common, goal systemic, perspective a variety of well known phenomena in the realm of consumer behavior including brand loyalty, variety seeking, impulsive buying, preferences, choices and regret. The goal systemic perspective affords guidelines for subsequent research on the dynamic aspects of consummatory behavior as well as offering insights into practical matters in the area of marketing.

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Consumer behavior, as any other behavior, is goal-oriented (Baumgartner & Pieters, 2008). When people decide which products and brands to buy and in which quantity, what to eat for breakfast, what kind of soda to drink, whether to take the bus or drive to work, they do so on account of different goals they are attempting to pursue. Motivational and goal-related concepts have been discussed in almost all areas of consumer behavior research including advertising (Pieters & Wedel, 2007), consumer decision-making (Bettman, Luce, & Payne, 1998; Fishbach & Dhar, 2005, 2008; Higgins, 2002; Shafir, 2007), product preferences (Bettman, Luce, & Payne 2008), and brand loyalty (Tam, Wood, & Ji, 2009). As Baumgartner and Pieters (2008) stated, “to propose that consumer behavior is goal-directed seems like arguing that water is wet” (p. 367). Despite this recognition, *the manner* in which goals operate in driving consumer behavior has been largely ignored. Motivational research has targeted specific goals that consumers may have and addressed stable motivational effects [(e.g. evaluation goals vs. learning goals in

consumers’ attention to advertising Pieters and Wedel (2007), goals of minimizing decision effort and maximizing decision accuracy Bettman et al. (1998); Chakravarti and Janiszewski (2003), etc.)], but it paid little attention to *the general, dynamic process* through which goals exert their effects. As a result, relevant motivational research in consumer behavior has been mainly phenomena and data driven rather than theory driven, and it stopped short of integrating empirical findings within a broader theoretical perspective capable of providing a systematic analysis and a set of testable hypotheses for guiding new research.

With the emergence of (what we have termed) the *New Look in Motivation* in the early 1990s this state of affairs began to change. The new approach developed within the area of social cognition offers a *motivation as cognition* framework that views motivational constructs as cognitively represented, and hence abiding by the general structural and allocational principles that govern all cognition (see Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007; Kruglanski & Kopetz, 2009a,b for reviews). Such principles include, among others, the notions of construct accessibility, associative networks, interconnectedness and/or dependence on limited cognitive resources. Premised on the notion that the cognitive treatment confers conceptual and methodological advantages and affords a more

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systematic study of goal-oriented action, the research inspired by the motivation as cognition approach enables new insights into classic problems of self-regulation and self-control, as well as into more general phenomena related to judgment, decision-making and choice.

In what follows, we describe and systematically discuss some of the recent goal-relevant consumer research and attempt to integrate it within a broader theoretical perspective on goal-directed behavior, referred to as the goal-systems theory. This theory, developed by Kruglanski and colleagues (Kruglanski et al., 2002), outlines a dynamic perspective on motivated action centered on the notion of *goal-systems*. The latter is defined as mental representations of motivational networks composed of interconnected goals and means. In goal systemic terms, motivational phenomena are viewed as the products of cognitive principles in their specific application to motivational constructs. Whether an activated goal will be pursued and the manner of its pursuits depend on several cognitive, motivational and emotional factors such as the desirability of the activated goal, the number of available means, concurrent presence of alternative goals, etc. As will be seen, goal-systems theory offers a theoretical approach and affords specific testable hypotheses, which may allow new insights into traditional phenomena of consumer behavior. Our analysis will emphasize two major and contrasting aspects of such behavior which illustrate its dynamic nature. One of these is stability and consistency represented in phenomena such as brand loyalty, and brand habit. The second refers to the instability of consumer preferences and choices exemplified by phenomena such as variety seeking, impulsive buying and changes in consideration sets. We propose that the goal-systems approach affords the treatment of these seemingly disparate aspects of consumer behavior in an integrative manner derived from the basic motivational principles that underlie the general dynamics of human action.

As an advance organizer, we first outline the historical background against which the theory of goal systems was proposed. We subsequently describe the substance of the theory, and consider its implications for consumer behavior. Specifically, our discussion will highlight the dynamic associations between goals and means as well as between multiple goals and consider the consequences of these relations for different phenomena in consumer behavior such as variety seeking, impulsive buying, preferences, choice, and regret.

Goal systems theory

Historical background: From separatism to functional conjunction

The importance for human action of goals and goal related-phenomena has been long acknowledged in psychological theorizing dating back to James (1890) and subsequently addressed by behavioristically-inclined researchers (Bindra, 1959; Skinner, 1953; Tolman, 1925) and the German “Will” psychologists (Ach, 1935; Lewin, 1935). More recently, goal concepts have often been featured in *cognitive* models of human action. Thus, Newell, Shaw, and Simon’s (1958) *General*

problem solver model concerned itself with means-ends relationships and a hierarchy of goals and sub-goals, and Miller, Galanter, and Pribram (1960) discussed the relation between goals and plans. Nonetheless, the various cognitive models had little to say about *what* kinds of goals people have, *how* goals and goal systems develop, and how they are integrated with other aspects of human behavior. In many analyses, the organism was portrayed as a spectator rather than as a participant, as if, “people only collect maps, but never go on trips” (Pervin, 1989).

In social psychology, motivational factors were often invoked only as alternative explanations juxtaposed to the cognitive accounts of different phenomena such as attitude change and biased causal attributions (Bem, 1972; Kelley, 1987; Miller & Ross, 1975). Additionally, in major social psychological models of human judgment (e.g., Brewer, Strull, & Wyer, 1988; Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990, Kruglanski & Webster, 1996a,b; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) distinct functions were assigned to motivational and cognitive variables. For instance, in the dual process models of attitude change the degree of motivational involvement was assumed to determine whether the information processing that mediates persuasion is “peripheral” or “central” (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), “heuristic” or “systematic,” (Chaiken, 1987).

Beyond its separation from cognition, motivation has often been treated *statically* in social psychological research. Specifically, individuals were classified as if in a fixed motivational state with identifiable properties. For instance, they were considered to have either a high or a low need for closure (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996a,b; Webster & Kruglanski, 1998), to be high or low on the need for cognition (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982), or to possess “learning” or “performance” goals (Dweck, 1999). Although these different types of goals were assumed to systematically impact various relevant phenomena including information processing, performance, creativity, and overall well-being and satisfaction (Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996), little attention was accorded to the dynamic process unfolding in the course of self-regulation. After all, having set a goal is just the first step involved in goal pursuit. Numerous subsequent activities need to take place before goal attainment can occur. Initiating goal-directed actions requires that one finds the appropriate means, wards off distractions, bypasses barriers, compensates for failures and shortcomings, and negotiates various goal conflicts that may arise. Although the dynamic nature of motivation has been addressed in the past (Atkinson & Birch, 1970; Lewin, 1935), its treatment was mainly theoretical with limited empirical investigation of the specific conditions for the appearance and disappearance of given motivational states.

Recently, social psychologists have realized that new insights into motivational *dynamism* may be gained if we abandon the separateness assumption of the “motivation” versus “cognition” program. Instead, a recent approach highlights previously neglected commonalities between motivational and cognitive variables and treats motivation as a type of cognition with specific motivational contents. This approach assumes that motivational constructs such as ‘goals’ and ‘means’ are represented cognitively, and hence are subject to the general principles that govern all cognition.

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