Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes 111 (2010) 139–146

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/obhdp

The desire to win: The effects of competitive arousal on motivation and behavior

Deepak Malhotra *

Harvard Business School, Baker Library, Room 471, Soldiers Field, Boston, MA 02163, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 4 April 2009
Accepted 20 November 2009
Available online 22 December 2009
Accepted by Maurice Schweitzer

Keywords:
Competitive arousal
Desire to win
Competitive motivation
Rivalry
Time pressure
Escalation
Auction
Bidding
Competition
Winning
Relative payoffs
Conflict
Negotiation
Dispute

ABSTRACT

The paper theoretically elaborates and empirically investigates the "competitive arousal" model of decision making, which argues that elements of the strategic environment (e.g., head-to-head rivalry and time pressure) can fuel competitive motivations and behavior. Study 1 measures real-time motivations of online auction bidders and finds that the "desire to win" (even when winning is costly and will provide no strategic upside) is heightened when rivalry and time pressure coincide. Study 2 is a field experiment which alters the text of email alerts sent to bidders who have been outbid; the text makes competitive (vs. non-competitive) motivations salient. Making the desire to win salient triggers additional bidding, but only when rivalry and time pressure coincide. Study 3, a laboratory study, demonstrates that the desire to win mediates the effect of rivalry and time pressure on over-bidding.

© 2009 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Competitive behavior, defined as the pursuit of assets perceived to be scarce and contested, is ubiquitous (cf., Deutsch, 1949). In domains as varied as business, politics, sports, and nature, individuals and other entities (e.g., firms) compete for limited resources, status, and survival (Hirshleifer, 1978). Competitive behavior is not only seen as a means by which an individual entity can benefit: in the market setting, it is also a primary mechanism for creating value (Smith, 1776). Despite these advantages, the motivation to compete can sometimes have pernicious effects, e.g., the adoption of unethical strategies like sabotage (Hoffman, Festinger, & Lawrence, 1954; Mui, 1995; Münster, 2007).

Paradoxically, competitive motivations may lead to strategies that harm not only one's adversary, but also oneself (Garcia, Tor, & Gonzalez, 2006; Güth, Schmittberger, & Schwarze, 1982; Ku, Malhotra, & Murnighan, 2005). Ku et al. (2005), for example, found that the desire to beat rival bidders can lead auction participants to pay more than an item is worth to them (cf., Cox, Smith, & Walker, 1992). Likewise, Malhotra, Ku, and Murnighan (2008) suggest that the desire to "win" can lead disputants to pursue costly litigation even when a less antagonistic strategy would lead to better outcomes. This paper investigates when and why potentially self-damaging competitive motivations and behaviors will emerge.

The motivation to compete and the desire to "win"

The motivation to compete often promotes survival and success (Axelrod, 1984). Under certain conditions, however, this naturally occurring motivation can transform into a more narrowly focused pursuit of "winning"—i.e., maximizing *relative* payoffs even at considerable personal cost (Bazerman, Loewenstein, & White, 1992; Messick & McClintock, 1968). For current purposes, I distinguish between "competitive motivation", defined as the desire to pursue scarce and contested assets (cf., Deutsch, 1949), and the "desire to win", defined as a preference for maximizing relative payoffs, even at personal cost. The desire to win requires competitive motivation, but competitive motivation does not require a desire to "win".

Prior research has not always distinguished these motivations. As a result, some studies include a preference for relative gains in their definition of competitive motivation (e.g., Messick & McClintock, 1968); others are consistent with our approach, arguing that these two motivations are meaningfully distinct (see Griffin-Pierson,

* Fax: +1 617 496 4191.
E-mail address: dmalhotra@hbs.edu.

0749-5978/$ - see front matter © 2009 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.obhdp.2009.11.005

1990). Mead's (1937, p. 17) studies of competitive behavior allow us to elaborate the distinction as follows: "[Competitive motivation] is oriented towards a goal in which the other competitors for the goal are secondary; [Desire to win] is oriented toward another human being, whose worsting is the primary goal." In auctions, for example, competitive motivation would drive auction participants to continue bidding until they reach their valuation for an item. A desire to win, in contrast, could drive bidders to pay more than an item is worth to deprive a competitor, even when doing so provides no strategic benefit (Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994).

The desire to win is not necessarily irrational. However, decision makers often exhibit a preference for relative gains even in situations where winning comes at a personal loss with no strategic upside (Malhotra & Bazerman, 2007). Messick and Thorngate (1967), for instance, found that people may pursue relative gains more vigorously than personal gains because they do not like receiving less than referent others. To illustrate the potentially dangerous mindset that many competitors adopt, Brandenburger and Nalebuff (1996) quote Gore Vidal as saying: "It is not enough to succeed. Others must fail." This is the essence of the desire to win.

While the literature on competitive motivation is vast, research that focuses on understanding the seemingly visceral desire to "win at any cost" is scant (cf., Loewenstein, 1996; Rubin et al., 1994). A recent "competitive arousal" model of decision making addresses this issue by identifying some of the conditions that can trigger a desire to win (Ku et al., 2005). This paper develops and substantiates the model by: (a) elaborating the mechanisms that underlie competitive arousal and (b) testing its core predictions.

Prior research on competitive motivation

Early work on competitive behavior focused more on the parameters of competitive (vs. cooperative) situations than on the motivation of individuals (Deutsch, 1949; Maller, 1929; May & Doob, 1937; Mead, 1937). This research identified two basic conditions for a competitive interaction: scarcity and contestation. The focus shifted to motivation with the work on social value orientation (e.g., Messick & McClintock, 1968), which, along with more recent extensions (De Dreu & Boles, 1998; Van Lange, Otten, De Bruin, & Joireman, 1997), largely focuses on individual differences in the propensity to adopt strategies that maximize relative payoffs even at personal cost. Extensions of this work have started to consider whether and when individuals will positively or negatively value others' outcomes, finding that contextual factors (e.g., negotiating over gains vs. losses) can affect the strength of individual preferences for relative payoffs (Loewenstein, Thompson, & Bazerman, 1989; Messick & Sentis, 1985).

Despite the variety of definitions, frameworks, and contexts represented in the literature, research on the motivation to maximize relative payoffs focuses on a single underlying mechanism, social comparison (Festinger, 1954; Garcia & Tor, 2009; Messick & Thorngate, 1967): the preference for maximizing relative payoffs stems from the tendency to judge the "goodness" of one's outcome by comparing it to the outcome of referent others (Thibaut & Kelly, 1959). Accordingly, the research presumes that the preference for relative payoffs pre-exists within the individual, but only manifests itself in behavior when social comparison processes are facilitated, as when the other party's outcome is made visible (e.g., Messick & Thorngate, 1967) or the salience of referent individuals is increased (e.g., Garcia & Tor, 2009).

More recently, it has been argued that a preference for maximizing relative payoffs may develop endogenously in competition—i.e., the desire to win can emerge, or be heightened, during the course of competitive interaction itself. In a variety of competitive contexts (e.g., auctions, negotiations and disputes), individuals start with the goal of making wise decisions and maximizing their own payoff, but as the competition unfolds, their motivation shifts towards "beating the other side" (Cooper & Fang, 2008; Delgado, Schotter, Ozbay, & Phelps, 2008; Malhotra et al., 2008). According to Rubin et al. (1994, p. 71): "In the early stages of many conflicts, Party is simply out to do as well as it can for itself, without regard for how well or how poorly Other is doing... As conflict escalates, however, Party's simple interest in doing well is supplanted by a clearly competitive objective. Now doing well means outdoing Other."

Ku et al. (2005) suggest that this shift in motivation may result from the emergence of "competitive arousal," an adrenaline-laden emotional state that can arise during competitive interaction (Ku et al., 2005). Their competitive arousal model places special emphasis on two antecedents of competitive arousal: heightened perceptions of rivalry (Allport, 1924) and increasing time pressure (cf., Kerstholt, 1994; Miller, 1960). The current research elaborates upon and evaluates the core premise of the competitive arousal model—that competitive environments can trigger the desire to win, which in turn drives potentially self-defeating competitive behavior. Evidence for this relationship would have tremendous implications for theory (e.g., regarding the nature of competitive motivation, the emergence of preferences for relative gains, and the basis of self-defeating competitive behavior) and practice (e.g., how best to protect against the potentially damaging effects of competitive arousal).

The competitive arousal model

According to the competitive arousal model, the desire to win emerges in a two-step process. First, characteristics of the competitive situation (e.g., rivalry and time pressure) stimulate physiological arousal. Second, arousal pushes motivation away from goal attainment (i.e., the rational pursuit of a scarce and contested asset) toward beating the competition at potentially high cost (cf., Mead, 1937). Here I elaborate on both elements.

The effect of arousal on the desire to win

The competitive arousal model builds on the work by Zillman and his colleagues (e.g., Zillmann & Bryant, 1974; Zillmann, Bryant, Cantor, & Day, 1975) on the effects of arousal on aggression and retaliation. This research demonstrates that elevated physiological arousal, even when triggered exogenously, can intensify hostility and aggression towards a perceived provoker (Zillmann, Katcher, & Milavsky, 1972). Furthermore, when arousal is pronounced, it can crowd out cognitive appraisals that might dampen aggression, such as the consideration of costly personal consequences (Loewenstein, 1996; Zillmann et al., 1972). Consistent with this expectation, Loewenstein, Nagin, and Paternoster (1997) find that physiological arousal leads to particularly aggressive decision making with limited attention to costs and benefits. The competitive arousal model extends this logic to the domain of competitive interactions, where arousal based on rivalry, time pressure, and audience effects can trigger the desire to win (Ku et al., 2005).

Zillmann, Bryant, Cantor, and Day (1975) proposed three mechanisms that explain why physiological arousal crowds out rational considerations (like long-term self-interest). First, arousal narrows the decision maker's focus to a set of salient environmental cues (e.g., repeat bidding by an auction opponent), diminishing the impact of other important but less salient cues (e.g., one's reservation value). Second, arousal triggers a temporary "lack of concern" for the consequences of one's actions, even when these consequences are known and considered. Third, arousal increases hostility because retaliation against a perceived aggressor is often the most

دریافت فوری ← متن کامل مقاله

ISIArticles
مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات