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.

Keywords: Goals; Means; Consumer behavior

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, affiliative 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...
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 emo-
tional 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, Srull, & 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. Specif-
cally, 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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