Consumer goal pursuit

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Consumers pursue goals when they perform behaviors (e.g., purchase low-calorie food) in order to achieve a desired end state (e.g., lose weight). Recent goal pursuit research can be classified into two streams of thought: conscious and unconscious goal pursuit. Conscious goal pursuit occurs when consumers are aware of the goal, while unconscious goal pursuit occurs when consumers are not aware of the goal, but still perform behaviors to achieve it. After discussing recent findings on how each type is more effective in helping consumers achieve their goals, I conclude that future research should not investigate the conscious and unconscious systems separately. Rather, future work should use a cooperative approach focused on how these systems interact to influence consumer goal pursuit.

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Conscious goal pursuit

Consumer goal pursuit occurs when a consumer buys a product in order to reach a desired end state [1–3]. This end state can take many forms. A consumer who wants to be healthy may buy vegetables at the supermarket, while a consumer who wants to impress others may buy nice clothes at a high-end store. Consumer psychology has seen an enormous amount of research in the past ten years investigating goal pursuit [4–6]. This interest reflects the important role of goals as determinants of consumer behavior, and also a broad interest in how to help consumers achieve goals associated with self-control (e.g., losing weight, saving money). A recent paper [7] indicates that the words “goal pursuit” and “self-control” are amongst the most used words in the period of 2004–2014 in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, one of the leading journals in consumer research.

The development of consumer goal pursuit research has resulted in two parallel streams of investigation, namely conscious and unconscious goal pursuit. During conscious goal pursuit, an individual is aware that a goal is active [8,9]. During unconscious goal pursuit, an individual is not aware that a goal is active [10,11]. For example, a sign about healthy eating may lead a consumer to choose vegetables over cookies while grocery shopping without being aware that the goal to eat healthy was activated by the sign. This distinction became important because pursuing goals was initially believed to require conscious awareness, as it was hard to believe people could work toward a desired end state without knowing the desire was there. Advances in research thinking and methods, which began to attribute more importance to unconscious processes in general, led researchers to raise the idea that consumers could also pursue goals unconsciously.

This article reviews recent consumer research on conscious and unconscious goal pursuit. This review will demonstrate that one type need not lead to more successful goal pursuit (i.e., more self-control) than the other. Rather, each has characteristics that can help consumers pursue their goals in different situations. As such, both conscious and unconscious goal pursuit can contribute to consumer well-being.

Conscious goal pursuit

Models of conscious goal pursuit investigate situations in which consumers are aware that a goal is active, consider feedback about their performance (“Am I doing well with regards to achieving the goal?”), and use the feedback to plan subsequent behavior [12–15]. For instance, if a consumer has a goal to lose 10 pounds, the consumer will evaluate current performance (e.g., “I have lost 7 pounds so far”) and decide how much effort (e.g., diet, exercising) they should still exert in order to achieve the goal [16**]. Therefore, inferences consumers make about their performance can have a significant impact on subsequent motivation to pursue the goal. Several recent findings shed light on how these inferences influence conscious goal pursuit.

One type of inference is that of goal progress. Some findings indicate that the less progress there is toward a goal, the more motivated people are to pursue the goal [17,18,19*]. For example, when people who were not yet committed to a donation campaign were told about a goal of raising $10,000, presenting information about how much still had to be donated led to the perception that not enough progress had been made, which increased motivation to donate [20]. Other findings, however, indicate that the perception that one has made progress toward a goal can be motivating. For example, people

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who were closer to achieving the goal of a loyalty program (e.g., had bought several cups of coffee in order to get a free coffee) made purchases more frequently, which indicates higher motivation to pursue the goal [21–23]. While less is known about the specific instances in which progress will be motivating or demotivating, it is clear that inferences of progress can largely influence conscious goal pursuit.

Another widely investigated inference is attainability. Consumers are more motivated the more possible they think it is to attain a goal [24]. When consumers perceive they may not be able to attain a goal, these perceptions may lead to disengagement from the goal [25], or at least a revision to a goal that is easier to attain [26]. On the contrary, when consumers perceive that they will be able to attain a goal, these perceptions may keep them engaged with the goal, which explains some of the findings showing that goal progress (i.e., being at a late goal pursuit stage) increases motivation to pursue a goal [27]. These findings on the influence of goal progress and attainability suggest that, because a conscious goal involves a target goal to be met, inferences consumers make about where they are with regards to that target are the main drivers of motivation.

While inferences about goal progress and attainability have dominated recent goal pursuit research, a series of other studies indicate that many factors influence a consumer’s ability to consciously pursue a goal. These factors include whether consumers want to attain a goal target or maintain their current goal state [28], consumers’ ability to visualize the goal [29], attention to goal-related stimuli [30], whether pursuit will occur in the present or in the future [31], whether there are interruptions to goal pursuit [32], and the impact that steps toward or away from the goal have on motivation to pursue it [33]. I next examine a different type of goal pursuit, which occurs when consumers are not aware that a goal is active.

**Unconscious goal pursuit**

Models of unconscious goal pursuit investigate situations in which the environment activates goals without consumers’ awareness, which leads consumers to choose behaviors that are consistent with the unconsciously activated goal [34,35]. For instance, a consumer who goes grocery shopping may be exposed to store materials which say “start eating well today.” Without being aware of the material and that it has activated a healthy eating goal, the consumer may proceed to make healthier choices during their supermarket trip. Several recent findings shed light on how environmental stimuli influence unconscious goal pursuit.

This research found that being exposed to brands associated with saving money led research participants to pick a good-value over a high-end gift for their participation in an experiment [36]. Exposure to words associated with health (e.g., fit, slim, shame) increased choices of healthy over tasty snacks [37]. Exposure to words associated with fun led to increased choices of casual over fancy restaurants [38]. Exposure to the American flag led to higher choice of Coca-Cola over Pepsi [39]. Following these demonstrations, which included evidence that unconscious goals were actually active and people were unaware of them [40], as well as evidence that they could have effects on people’s everyday behaviors [41], there have been several attempts to explain unconscious goal pursuit.

Explaining the processes behind unconscious goal pursuit typically involves the manipulation of variables that lead consumers to not behave consistently with the activated goal. These moderators have the potential to show whether consumers merely follow goals suggested by the environment or, alternatively, that the unconscious system has a mechanism to defend itself from unwanted influences. One of the manipulated variables is the novelty of the consumer context. When facing a novel choice, such as buying a gift for a professor, students did not behave in accordance with an unconsciously activated goal, showing that whether unconscious goal pursuit takes place depends on the choice context [38]. When the situation is novel, the unconscious system seems to protect itself from external influences, and not follow an activated goal. A second variable is the extent to which consumers perceive that their immediate environment is trying to persuade them to perform a behavior. When consumers were exposed to stimuli clearly designed to persuade them, such as brand slogans suggesting they should spend money, they did not follow the activated goal, and actually spent less money in an unrelated purchase [42]. In a similar fashion, people unconsciously react against the goals suggested by their significant other when they perceive that their significant other is a controlling person [43]. A third variable is the match between the unconsciously activated goal and people’s personality. Congruent with the idea that unconscious goals may not always produce behavior that is consistent with the goal, unconsciously activating the goal to attend a party made introverts less likely to choose arousing products, such as a dance music CD [44]. These findings indicate that goals activated by environmental stimuli can have an unconscious effect on consumer behavior, but that consumers are not defenseless against these influences. Consumers are able to behave consistently or inconsistently with the activated goal, depending on the context or individual characteristics.

This stream of investigation initially examined whether people can unconsciously pursue goals in the market place, as the literature on unconscious goal pursuit had mostly been developed outside of the consumer domain. In addition to studying the processes responsible for unconscious goal pursuit, recent research has started to investigate how activated goals may operate in tandem with other variables that are present in the market place.
One such line of research investigates how different emotions, such as sadness and pride, interact with unconsciously activated goals to influence behavior [45–47]. For instance, when a goal to seek pleasure is active, sadness decreases pleasurable behavior by increasing sensitivity to the harmful consequences of behavior [45]. This indicates that the unconscious system does not simply use concepts highlighted by the environmental in order to make decisions, but also affective information that can inform the pursuit of goals. Of course, there is ample evidence that consumers sometimes fail to pursue their goals, which represents a self-control failure [48,49]. Yet, the research discussed above indicates that a lack of consciousness and failure to pursue a goal are not necessary related. I conclude with a discussion of this issue.

**Conclusion: an interactive view of conscious and unconscious goal pursuit**

The last decade has been extremely prolific in consumer goal pursuit research. This research has demonstrated that conscious goal pursuit can use awareness of the goal to examine which available products offer attributes that will satisfy the goal and plan how product will be consumed in order to achieve the goal [50]. Unconscious goal pursuit can use the accessible goal information to decide which attributes match this information (e.g., goal to eat healthy — healthy attribute) and pick products that offer such attributes (e.g., salad, granola bar). At this point, it is safe to say that failing to pursue goals is not a result of lack of reasoning and thought, typically associated with unconsciousness, while pursuing goals results in a result of reasoned, well-thought behavior, typically associated with consciousness. The findings reviewed here indicate that both systems are powerful, and have their own ways to ensure that goal pursuit will take place.

Following these findings, some recent research has moved from the idea that one system is better than the other, and started investigating situations in which each system excels. This research has demonstrated that the unconscious can integrate a large amount of information in meaningful clusters, therefore performing better when the context requires complex decisions [51]. The conscious, however, can consider differences in magnitude between attribute values, therefore performing better when the context requires examining specific magnitudes instead of just whether attributes are good or bad [52]. Additional evidence shows that the conscious is better able than the unconscious to pick the single best product to pursue a goal from a set, but the unconscious is better able to pick products that can serve the goal in general, not necessarily the best [53].

For instance (Figure 1), consumers were asked to pick a healthy food from a set containing a granola bar (best product to pursue a health goal), sun chips (second best product), and potato chips (not a product that can be used to pursue a health goal). Consumers consciously pursuing a goal were more likely to pick the granola bar (i.e., best product to satisfy the goal), while consumers unconsciously pursuing a goal were more likely to pick either the granola bar or sun chips (i.e., the two products that could satisfy the goal).

Over the last decade, we have greatly improved our understanding of how consumers pursue goals. Moving forward, it is important to understand how conscious and unconscious goal pursuit interact, rather than compete, with each other. Many conscious processes (e.g., planning in advance) may use the help of unconscious processes (e.g., using information available in the immediate environment) to ensure that all available opportunities to achieve a goal are pursued. Understanding contexts in which these conscious–unconscious goal interactions occur, and when they help vs. harm goal pursuit, is an important direction in which to take goal pursuit research. Given the advantages of both conscious and unconscious goal pursuit, a collaborative approach to how these systems direct people to pursue their goals has the potential to result in an array of new findings that cannot be uncovered if the two systems are investigated individually.

**Conflict of interest statement**

None declared.

**References and recommended reading**

Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

- of special interest
- **of outstanding interest**


One of the first papers to demonstrate that marketing stimuli, in the form of brand names, can lead to behavior consistent with that suggested by the stimuli. For example, exposure to the brand name Apple made participants more creative in an unrelated task.


A theoretical account of how momentary goal activation influences choice. By formalizing the impact of goals on decisions, the paper predicts choice in situations where traditional choice models cannot explain consumer decisions.


This paper demonstrates that merely being exposed to a product (e.g., salad option in a restaurant menu) that is consistent with a goal (e.g., eating healthy food) can generate the perception that the goal has been satisfied, and encourage behavior that is inconsistent with the goal (e.g., choosing unhealthy food).


Several studies demonstrate that two factors affect consumer goal pursuit motivation. Consumers are motivated to pursue a goal when they perceive the goal to be (a) somewhat challenging, but still (b) possible to attain.


This paper is the first to demonstrate that different stimuli used to influence consumers (e.g., brands, slogans) are distinctively effective in encouraging unconscious goal pursuit. Slogans may in fact lead consumers to perform behaviors that are opposite of what the slogans are suggesting, such as saving money when the slogan suggests spending.


This paper challenges the assumption that negative mood leads people to indulge in order to feel better. When a hedonic consumption goal is active, sadness in fact decreases hedonic consumption. This occurs because sad people are more sensitive to harmful behaviors. In the presence of a hedonic consumption goal, there is danger of harm for the individual (i.e., hedonic consumption in excess can be harmful), thus sad people decrease their hedonic consumption as they have high sensitivity to harmful behaviors.


Several studies represent a rare attempt to demonstrate that one type of goal pursuit (conscious versus unconscious) is not necessarily better than the other. Rather, there are some things that conscious goal pursuit can do better (e.g., pick the product that can best satisfy a goal), and other things that the unconscious can do better (e.g., pick any product that can satisfy a goal).