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The Divergent Effects of External Systems of Control on Early Stage Goal Pursuit

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

There is a generalized belief that external sources of control are detrimental to goal pursuit. Past research (e.g., psychological reactance and social loafing theory) has suggested that feeling the presence of a powerful other exercising control over one's life undermines people's willingness to provide effort in service of goal achievement. However, we argue that thinking about external systems of control – that is, the overarching institutions, organizations, and norms within which individuals live their daily life (Cutright, Wu, Banfield, Kay, and Fitzsimons 2011) - need not always lead to demotivation. Specifically, we predict that in the early stage of the pursuit of long-term goals, reminding people that goal striving occurs within external systems of control positively affects their motivation when goals are planned in a specific (*vs.* vague) way.

We base our predictions on the following reasoning. When people start planning a long-term goal (e.g., savings, dieting) using very specific implementations, they experience low self-efficacy due to the anticipated efforts and obstacles that such a type of planning underlies (Dalton and Spiller 2012, Townsend and Liu 2012). To the extent this is so, then anything that makes the individual feel like the goal is attainable should increase motivation. What might help the individual feel this way? Compensatory Control Theory (CCT; Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, and Laurin 2008) suggests that people can compensate for feelings of low self-efficacy by reminding oneself of the various ways in which order and structure are present in the environment. When feelings of personal control are experimentally lowered, CCT research shows that people fluidly turn to external sources of control to maintain the belief that the world is under control, even if the source of control is not the self, and that doing so, in turn, increases confidence in goal pursuit (Kay et al. 2014).

Thus, we propose that reminders of external systems of controls should flip or reverse the negative effect of specific planning on motivation at early stages of goal pursuit by heightening feelings of goal attainability. We tested our proposition in five studies using the consumer-relevant context of savings goals, and external systems ranging from religions (study 1, 2, and 3) to brands (study 4A and 4B).

In study 1 ($N = 204$), we observed that reminding participants of a controlling God led to significantly higher levels of motivation to pursue a savings goals, relative to a no-reminder neutral condition ($t(198) = 1.94, p = .05, M's: 5.27$ *vs.* 4.48), and relative to reminding participants of a God that created the world but does not provide any control ($t(198) = 2.03, p = .04, M_{\text{creating God}} = 4.50$). This additional comparison condition was included to demonstrate it was the controlling aspects of religion, rather than just religion belief per se, that drives the effect.

In study 2 ($N = 161$), we sought to demonstrate the effect was strongest when the goal was specific rather than vague. To this end, we varied the degree of specificity of the savings goal by asking participants to either select one of six ranges of sums for their project or to enter the savings amount and thereafter to plan their savings in numeric terms. Controlling for age, income and goal importance, we found a significant effect of the external system of control reminder on savings motivation when participants were asked to plan very specifically ($p = .03$,

$M_{\text{controlling God}} = 6.04$ vs. $M_{\text{neutral}} = 5.61$). No effect were detected when participants were asked to make moderately specific plans.

In study 3 ($N = 194$), to provide evidence of mechanism, a moderated mediation analysis demonstrated the above effect was mediated by perceived goal attainability.

In study 4A and 4B, we adopted a new reminder of external systems of control: brand reliability, which we define as the consumer's perception of a brand's ability to make him/her reach his/her goals. Accordingly, study 4A ($N = 151$) tested first the compensatory relationship between a controlling God and brand reliability when planning was specific (vs. vague). Controlling for age, income, and goal importance, a moderated mediation analysis revealed a conditional indirect effect of specific planning on brand reliability through self-reported anxiety when beliefs in a controlling God were low. As expected, it was not significant when such beliefs were high.

Finally, in study 4B ($N = 273$), we tested our hypotheses by priming the belief that brands can be conceived as overarching institutions that bring order into the consumers' life to help them reach their goals. A regression analysis found that, as reminders of religious control, when planning was vague, framing brand as external systems of control made participants less willing to engage in financial activities, relative to those in the baseline condition ($t(264) = 2.71$, $p < .01$, M 's: 5.28 vs. 5.77). When planning was specific, they were more willing to do so, relative to those in the baseline condition ($t(264) = -2.32$, $p = .02$, M 's: 5.74 vs. 5.35). Honing in on the specificity of this effect, when brands were only depicted as trustworthy agents, rather controlling agents, no similar effect were obtained.

In sum, this research demonstrates divergent effects of reminding consumers that their long-term goals occurs within external systems of control. By demonstrating that reminders of external systems of control can reverse an established effect, our findings contribute to the recent stream of research investigating the negative impact of planning (e.g., Dalton and Spiller 2012, Townsend and Liu 2012) as well as the recent infusion of compensatory control research to understanding consumer behavior (e.g., Cutright 2012).

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Table: Overview of studies

| Studies | Samples | Between-subjects designs | Results |
|---------|---------|---|---|
| 1 | N = 204 | 2 (Planning: specific vs. vague) x 3 (External system: controlling God vs. creating God vs. baseline) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When planning is specific, reminder of external system of control increases goal motivation - When planning is vague, reminder of external system of control reduces goal motivation - Hypothesis not supported with a creating God (as expected) |
| 2 | N = 161 | 2 (Planning: moderately specific vs. very specific) x 2 (External system: controlling God vs. baseline) | Hypothesis supported with a very specific planning but not with a moderately specific planning. |
| 3 | N = 194 | 3 (Planning: no planning vs. moderately specific vs. very specific) x 2 (External system: controlling God vs. baseline) | Validation of the mechanism behind the effects detected: moderated mediation by perceived goal attainability |
| 4A | N = 151 | 2 (Planning: vague vs. specific) x Continuous (belief in a controlling God) | Validation of the compensatory relationship between a controlling God and brand reliability |
| 4B | N = 273 | 2 (Planning: vague vs. specific) x 3 (External system: brand reliability vs. brand trust vs. baseline) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hypothesis supported with a reliable brand as external system of control - Hypothesis not supported with a trustworthy brand (as expected) |