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Managing Motivation over Time: How Focusing on the Present versus Future Influences Goal Pursuit

Jordan Etkin and Rebecca K. Ratner

Report Summary

Consumers set goals in order to motivate themselves to achieve desired outcomes. Those goals are frequently related to consumption processes (e.g., financial services, health and fitness). The question is, What messaging can marketers use to motivate consumers at various stages of the consumption process?

In this report, Jordan Etkin and Rebecca Ratner address this question by exploring the role of temporal cues in impacting consumer motivation across the course of goal pursuit. They argue that drawing consumers' attention to the present versus the future differentially impacts motivation, depending on consumers' perceptions of goal-progress to date. For example, consider a consumer who has begun to save for retirement versus one who has made considerable progress in doing so. Will targeting these consumers with time-related messages focused on the present ("take action today") or the future ("take action over the next two months") motivate them to continue saving money?

To examine this question, Etkin and Ratner conduct a series of experimental studies. In each study, consumers either report their perceptions of progress or are made to feel they have made low or high progress toward a goal. Consumers then are asked to focus either on pursuing their goal now (e.g., over the next week) or over a longer time horizon (e.g., over the next two months). The studies examine the effects of these variables on consumers' motivation toward attaining their personal fitness, savings, and academic goals.

Overall, the authors find support for their predictions. At low levels of goal-progress, consumers feel more motivated to pursue their goal when they adopt a *present* focus for goal pursuit, as focusing on the present increases their confidence in being able to attain the goal. In contrast, at high levels of goal-progress, individuals feel more motivated to pursue their goal when they adopt a *future* focus for goal pursuit, as being reminded of the longevity of goal pursuit decreases any current feelings of complacency.

Managerial implications

Marketers benefit from keeping consumers motivated to pursue their personal goals, as highly motivated consumers are more likely to purchase goal-related products and services (e.g., gym memberships, fitness bars, and exercise apparel to attain a fitness goal). These results indicate that time-related messaging should change depending on consumers' perceptions of progress toward their goals.

For consumers who perceive low progress, marketers can increase motivation by using language such as "enroll today" or "get started now." Short-term promotions ("today only") may be particularly effective among these people. Alternatively, for consumers who perceive high progress, marketers can increase consumer motivation by prompting them to focus on the long term. Among this group, using language such as "enroll for one year" may encourage desired purchasing behavior.

Jordan Etkin is a doctoral candidate and Rebecca K. Ratner is Professor of Marketing, both at the R. H. Smith School of Business, University of Maryland.

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Consumers set goals in order to motivate themselves to achieve desired outcomes. They establish goals to build their financial savings in order to live comfortably, to complete important work-related projects in order to achieve professional recognition, and to improve their physical fitness to maintain good health (Locke and Latham 1990; Soman and Cheema 2004; Vohs, Baumeister, and Tice 2008). These and other types of goals guide much of consumer behavior.

To be successful in achieving a goal, consumers must maintain a high level of motivation to pursue the goal, in both early and later stages of goal pursuit. For instance, consumers striving to live comfortably need to be motivated to save when they have little money in the bank (low progress), as well as when they have accumulated a considerable sum (high progress). Professionals striving for a promotion need to stay motivated when they have recently initiated a new project (low progress) as well as after completing several stages of the project. Fitness buffs need to stay motivated to exercise at the beginning of a new workout regimen (low progress), as well as towards the end (high progress). How can consumers effectively maintain a high level of motivation to pursue a goal at both low and high levels of goal progress?

In this paper we explore the role of temporal cues in impacting consumer motivation across the course of goal pursuit. To make progress towards achievement of goals such as those related to one's savings, profession, and health often requires a significant amount of time. For instance, saving for a down payment may take years, and being healthy may take a lifetime. As a result, consumers' temporal focus for goal pursuit may vary: they may focus on what they have to do to pursue their goal in the present (e.g., pack lunch today, go to the gym tonight) or instead look to the future (e.g., pack lunches this month, go to the gym three times a week for the rest of the year; Etkin and Ratner 2013).

We propose that directing one's attention to goal pursuit in the present versus future will differentially impact on consumer motivation depending on whether consumers perceive they have made low progress versus high progress to goal attainment. Specifically, we predict that when consumers perceive goal progress to be low, they will feel more motivated to pursue their goal when cued to focus on goal pursuit now (vs. over a longer time horizon). In contrast, when consumers perceive goal progress to be high, they will feel more motivated to pursue their goal when cued to focus on goal pursuit over a longer time horizon (vs. now). We argue that these effects are driven by consumers' concerns about goal attainability at low levels of progress and complacency or boredom with goal pursuit at high levels of progress. Focusing on the present

(vs. future) increases perceptions of goal attainability, and is thus more motivating when goal progress is low. Focusing on the future (vs. present) reduces complacency, and is thus more motivating when goal progress is high.

In the sections that follow, we review prior literature, develop our predictions regarding the impact of temporal cues at low versus high levels of goal progress, present the results of one exploratory study and several controlled experiments, and discuss managerial implications of these results.

Dynamics of Goal Pursuit

Many of consumers' most important goals require repeated actions, involving sustained motivation over time. For instance, completing projects at work may take months, saving money to live comfortably may take decades, and being healthy may take a lifetime. Whereas much of prior work conceptualized goal-directed motivation as static over time (Atkinson 1957; Carver and Scheier 1998; Locke and Latham 1990), more recent research suggests that motivation is in fact dynamic, changing over the course of goal pursuit in response to a number of factors. Two key dynamics of motivation in goal pursuit are goal progress (e.g., Fishbach and Dhar 2005; Förster, Higgins, and Idson 1998; Kivetz et al. 2006; Soman and Shi 2003), whereby goal-directed motivation varies as a function of consumers' progress towards goal attainment (e.g., how much of a loan has been paid off), and time horizon (e.g., Etkin and Ratner 2013; Ramanathan and Dhar 2010; Trope and Liberman 2003), whereby goal-directed motivation varies as a function of whether consumers' adopt a present versus future focus for goal pursuit (e.g., whether the loan will be paid off next month or next year).

Perceptions of progress towards goal achievement have a significant impact on goal-directed motivation. Indeed, feeling the need to make progress towards a desired end-state is what motivates consumers to pursue their goals (Fishbach and Dhar 2005; Förster et al. 1998; Heath, Larrick, and Wu 1999; Higgins 1987; Locke and Latham 2002; Nunes and Drèze 2006). For instance, perceiving the need to make progress towards a weight loss goal made female dieters more likely to choose an apple (vs. a chocolate bar) as a parting gift (Fishbach and Dhar 2005). Relatedly, the Goal Gradient Effect demonstrates that consumers' motivation increases as a function of progress towards goal attainment (Lewin, 1935, 1951; Liberman & Förster, 2008;

Kivetz et al. 2006). Even illusory progress, such as a free reward in a rewards program, increases consumers' desire to continue toward goal attainment (Kivetz et al. 2006).

More recent work points to a nuanced relationship between goal progress and motivation. For instance, making progress can be liberating if consumers focus on having made sufficient progress towards goal achievement (Fishbach and Dhar 2005; Khan and Dhar 2006); on the contrary, making progress can motivate continued goal pursuit if consumers focus on their commitment to the goal (Fishbach and Dhar 2005). The impact of goal progress on motivation is also subject to a number of additional moderators; for example, the diversity of means used to pursue the goal (Etkin and Ratner 2012), whether progress is earned versus endowed (Nunes and Drèze 2006), and the rate of velocity towards goal attainment (Huang and Zhang 2011; Zhang and Huang 2010).

Though less studied to date, the time horizon of goal pursuit also has an impact on goal-directed motivation. Consumers are generally better at exerting self-control in goal pursuit when focusing on a long-term (vs. short-term) time horizon (Fujita et al. 2006; Trope and Liberman 2003). For instance, participants primed to think abstractly (associated with temporal distance) persisted for longer on a handgrip task used to assess self-regulation compared to those primed to think concretely (associated with temporal proximity; Fujita et al. 2006). As with goal progress, moderators of effects of time horizon on motivation have also been documented. For example, focusing on goal pursuit over a short time horizon is more motivating when consumers are using diverse means toward goal attainment, whereas focusing on goal pursuit over a long time horizon is more motivating when consumers are using similar means toward goal attainment (Etkin and Ratner 2013). Likewise, near versus far deadlines can be differentially motivating: immediate expiration dates motivate action more when consumers adopt a prevention focus and later expiration dates motivate action when they adopt a promotion focus (Ramanathan and Dhar 2010).

The Current Research

Research on these two dynamics of goal-directed motivation – goal progress and time horizon - have developed relatively independently, leaving unanswered questions about how these two factors may interact to influence motivation. The present research begins to address

this question by considering joint influences of perceived goal progress and temporal cues on goal-directed motivation. Specifically, we explore the influence of adopting a present versus future focus for goal pursuit on motivation at high and low levels of goal progress. We propose that at low levels of goal progress, consumers will feel more motivated to pursue their goal when they focus on goal pursuit in the present (vs. future). In contrast, at high levels of goal progress, we predict consumers will feel more motivated to pursue their goal when they focus on goal pursuit in the future (vs. present).

We base our propositions on the differential concerns that consumers have at low versus high levels of goal progress, and the impact of adopting a present versus future focus on these concerns. First, let us consider motivation among low progress consumers. At low levels of goal progress, consumers are unsure of their ability to achieve their goal, and thus question their long-term commitment to goal pursuit (Bandura 1977, 1997; Etkin and Ratner 2012; Fishbach and Dhar 2005; Zhang and Huang 2010). As a result, reducing consumers' goal achievement concerns should help them maintain a high level of motivation to pursue their goal.

We argue that adopting a present (vs. future) focus for goal pursuit will help consumers overcome uncertainty regarding goal achievement. Consider the following example: Joe has a goal to save money for some home repairs, and to-date he has saved very little money. Joe can either focus on what he can do to save money in the present (e.g., pack lunch today) or what he can do to save money in the future (e.g., pack lunch every day for the next six months). Given that Joe is uncertain he will still be pursuing his goal in six months' time, focusing on the future is unlikely to reduce Joe's concerns about achieving his goal (i.e., if Joe isn't sure he'll be able to continue his efforts for six months, then thinking about packing lunch every day during that period shouldn't alleviate his concerns about goal achievement). In contrast, Joe should be relatively certain about goal pursuit in the present (i.e., Joe is certain that he can pack lunch today). Thus, adopting a present (vs. future) focus may make Joe less concerned with achieving his goal, and consequently more motivated to pursue his savings goa1. More generally:

H1a: When perceptions of goal progress are low, focusing on the present (vs. future) helps consumers maintain a high level of motivation.

H2a: Consumers who perceive low progress towards goal attainment are more motivated by focusing on the present (vs. future), because doing so increases their confidence in being able to achieve the goal.

In comparison, consumers who have made high progress towards achieving a goal are likely to be confident about goal achievement (Wood and Bandura 1989; Zhang and Huang 2010). However, at high levels of goal progress consumers run the risk of becoming complacent with goal pursuit (Fishbach and Dhar 2005), and thus may be concerned with growing bored of pursuing their goal. As a result, reducing consumers' boredom concerns should help them maintain a high level of motivation to pursue their goal.

We argue that adopting a future (vs. present) focus for goal pursuit will better help consumers overcome concerns regarding growing bored with goal pursuit. Consider the following example: Jane also has a goal to save money, and to-date she has saved a lot of money. Jane can either focus on what she can do to save money in the present (e.g., pack lunch today) or what she can do to save money in the future (e.g., pack lunch every day for the next six months). Given that Jane has already made a lot of progress towards her savings goal, focusing on goal pursuit in the present may not be sufficient to overcome feelings of boredom with the goal (i.e., packing lunch today seems less pressing if one has already saved a lot of money). Consistent with our argument, prior work has shown that focusing on the present (vs. future) can exacerbate concerns about satiation and boredom (Zhang, Fishbach, and Ratner 2011). In contrast, focusing on the future may help to reduce Jane's concerns with boredom (i.e., even if Jane knows she has made a lot of progress, to achieve her goal she must continue striving in the future). Thus, adopting a future (vs. present) focus may make Jane less concerned with growing bored of goal pursuit, and consequently more motivated to pursue her savings goal. More generally:

H1b: When perceptions of goal progress are high, focusing on the future (vs. present) helps consumers maintain a high level of motivation.

H2b: Consumers who perceive high progress towards goal attainment are more motivated by focusing on the future (vs. present), because doing so reduces boredom associated with continued goal pursuit.

These predictions reflect our theorizing about how perceived progress and temporal cues impact consumer goal pursuit in the real world. To provide an initial test of whether our hypothesized interaction pattern would obtain in a meaningful real-world context, we conducted an exploratory study. This pilot study tested our predictions by observing participants' interaction with a website (saveup.com) designed to help them attain financial savings goals. We measured consumers' interest in using the SaveUp program to achieve their savings goals when they perceived their own progress to be low (vs. high) and they were prompted to think about using the site in the present (vs. future). Specifically, we asked them to think about using the program "right now" (present condition) or "over the next year" (future condition) to save money. Next, we provided participants a link to the actual SaveUp site and gave them a few minutes to browse the site.

As we predicted, when they perceived their progress toward attaining their savings goals to be low, participants were more likely to register for a SaveUp account when they viewed the website as a tool for right now. In contrast, when participants perceived their progress toward attaining their savings goals to be high, there were more likely to register for an account when they viewed the website as a tool over the long-term horizon.

We next turn to more controlled tests of our hypotheses in a series of studies. In study 1, we experimentally manipulate participants' perceptions of progress towards achievement of a fitness goal and ask them to consider goal pursuit over the next few days (present focus) or the next few months (future focus). Study 2 provides evidence for the proposed process driving our effects; namely, goal achievement concerns when progress is low and complacency/boredom concerns when progress is high. Studies 3 and 4 focus particularly on low-progress consumers and examine the role of self-efficacy in moderating these effects. The results suggest ways to use temporal cues to motivate low-progress consumers who are low (vs. high) in perceived self-efficacy, and how self-efficacy-related interventions can benefit those who adopt a future focus.

Study 1: Effects of Goal Progress and Temporal Cue on Fitness Motivation

Study 1 builds on the results of our pilot (SaveUp) study by providing a more controlled test of our predictions regarding the impact of goal progress and temporal focus on motivation. We experimentally manipulate the amount of progress participants perceive they have made toward a

goal (here, a fitness goal) and measure how motivated they report feeling to pursue their goal when asked to think about pursuing their fitness goal in the present (over the next 7 days) versus the future (over the next 7 weeks). We predict that participants who perceive low progress towards their goal will be more motivated when thinking about pursuing their goal now rather than over the long term. In contrast, we predict that participants who perceive high progress towards their goal will be more motivated when prompted to focus on goal pursuit over than long term than now.

Design and method

Eighty-four individuals recruited from a large East Coast university participated in this study in exchange for payment ($6.00 for the hour-long session). We randomly assigned participants to condition in a 2 (goal progress: low, high) X 2 (temporal cue: present, future) between-subjects design.

First, we asked participants to indicate whether they were currently pursuing a goal to be physically fit. Eight participants reported not having a fitness goal and were excluded from further analyses (N = 76). Next, we asked participants to consider how many times they had exercised in the past week ("How many times have you exercised in the past week (i.e., the past seven days)?") and when they had exercised most recently ("When was the last time that you exercised?").

To manipulate perceived goal progress, we varied the response scales provided to participants to report their answers to these questions (see Etkin and Ratner 2012). In the low progress condition, we gave participants the following response options, intended to induce a sense of low goal progress: for the frequency question, "5 or fewer", "6-7", "8-9", "10 or more", and for the recency question, "less than one hour ago", "more than one hour ago but less than three hours ago", "more than three hours ago but less than six hours ago", "more than six hours ago". In contrast, we gave participants in the high progress condition the following response options, intended to induce a high sense of goal progress: for the frequency question, "0", "1", "2", "3 or more", for the recency question, "less than one week ago", "more than one week ago but less than two weeks ago", "more than two weeks ago but less than three weeks ago", "more than three weeks ago".

As a manipulation check, after responding to these items participants reported the extent to which they perceived they had made progress towards attaining their fitness goal on a series of three measures, all on seven-point scales ("I exercise: 1 = *Rarely*, 7 = *Frequently*"; "I exercise: 1 = *A little*, 7 = *A lot*"; "How much progress do you perceive you have made towards your goal of being fit?" 1 = *Not a lot of progress*, 7 = *A lot of progress*). We combined these measures (α = .89) to form a composite measure of goal progress. As we intended, participants perceived that they had made more progress towards attainment of their fitness goal in the high progress condition relative to the low progress condition ($M_{\text{high progress}} = 5.05$, $M_{\text{low progress}} = 4.10$; $F(1, 74) = 8.40$, $p < .01$).

Following the progress manipulation, we presented participants with a series of three HealthSmart protein bars (lemon flavor, chocolate flavor, and peanut butter flavor) and asked them to think about using these bars to help them pursue their fitness goal. In the present cue condition, we instructed participants to consider using the bars over the course of the next seven days, whereas in the future cue condition we instructed participants to consider using the bars over the course of the next seven weeks. Finally, we asked participants to report how motivated they felt to be physically fit ("How motivated do you feel to pursue your goal to be physically fit?") on a seven-point scale (1 = *Not at all motivated*, 7 = *Very motivated*).

Results

A 2 (goal progress) X 2 (temporal cue) ANOVA on fitness motivation revealed the predicted interaction between goal progress and time horizon ($F(1, 72) = 10.09$, $p < .01$; see Figure 1; Figures follow References throughout). Supporting our predictions, participants in the low goal progress condition reported being more motivated to pursue their fitness goal when they considered its pursuit in the present versus future ($M_{\text{present}} = 5.58$, $M_{\text{future}} = 4.65$; $F(1, 72) = 4.24$, $p < .05$). In contrast, participants in the high goal progress condition reported being more motivated to pursue their fitness goal when they considered its pursuit in the future versus present ($M_{\text{future}} = 6.18$, $M_{\text{present}} = 5.05$; $F(1, 72) = 6.39$, $p < .05$).

Discussion

The pattern of results obtained in study 1 replicates that of our pilot study, demonstrating that adopting a present (vs. future) focus increases goal-directed motivation when consumers perceive low progress towards goal achievement. However, adopting a future (vs. present) focus increases goal-directed motivation when consumers perceive high progress towards goal achievement. That the results replicate across different goal domains (financial savings and fitness) speaks to the robustness of the phenomenon. However, our findings thus far do not speak to the mechanism underlying this interaction pattern. In the next study, we seek evidence for the proposed processes leading to the differential effects of temporal cue among consumers who perceive low versus high progress.

Study 2: Mediating Roles of Confidence in Goal Achievement and Complacency in Goal Pursuit

Study 2 has two primary objectives. First, the study tests the underlying mechanisms for the obtained interaction pattern. We hypothesize that consumers who perceive low goal progress are more motivated by focusing on goal pursuit in the present (vs. future) because doing so increases their confidence in being able to achieve the goal. We expect that consumers who perceive high goal progress, in contrast, are more motivated by focusing on goal pursuit in the future (vs. present) because doing so decreases their feelings complacency with goal pursuit. To test for the proposed mechanisms, the study includes measures of certainty that consumers will be able to achieve the goal (low progress mediator) and boredom with goal pursuit (high progress mediator). Second, in contrast to study 1, here we present an interval of the same length (one week) to all participants, and only vary whether that week will occur in the near versus far future. This allows us to focus specifically on the near versus far future aspect of our time messages, whereas our earlier studies looked at a shorter versus longer length of time for goal pursuit (i.e., 7 days versus 7 weeks).

Design and method

One hundred and sixty-one members of an online panel (ages 18 to 73) participated in this study in exchange for a small payment ($.25). We randomly assigned participants to condition in a 2 (goal progress: low, high) X 2 (temporal cue: present, future) between-subjects design.

As in study 1, we first asked participants to indicate whether they were currently pursuing a fitness goal. Twelve participants reported not having a fitness goal and were excluded from further analyses (N = 142). Next, participants completed the goal progress manipulation. Half of participants responded to the exercise frequency and recency questions on the high frequency response scales from study 1 (low progress condition) and the remaining half responded to the exercise frequency and recency questions on the low frequency response scales (high progress condition).

We then presented participants with a picture of three PowerBar protein bars. In the present condition, we asked participants to consider using these protein bars over the course of the next week, whereas in the future condition, we asked participants to consider using these protein bars over the course of a week six months from now.

Finally, we asked participants to report how motivated they felt to be physically fit ("How motivated do you feel to pursue your goal to be physically fit?") on a seven-point scale (1 = *Not at all motivated*, 7 = *Very motivated*). To test for mediation, we asked participants how confident they felt in being able to achieve their goal ("How confident are you that you will be able to achieve your fitness goal?") and how bored they felt with pursuing their fitness goal ("How bored are you with pursuing your fitness goal?") on seven-point scales (1 = *Not at all confident, not at all bored*; 7 = *Very confident, very bored*). We asked respondents to report boredom rather than complacency as that word should be more easily understood by participants.

Results

Motivation. A 2 (goal progress) X 2 (temporal cue) ANOVA on motivation revealed the predicted interaction ($F(1, 138) = 25.21$, $p < .001$; see Figure 2). Consistent with the results of study 1, participants in the low progress condition were more motivated to pursue their fitness goal when they focused on its pursuit in the present versus future ($M_{present} = 5.51$, $M_{future} = 4.00$;

F (1, 138) = 23.78, $p < .001$). In contrast, participants in the high goal progress condition were more motivated to pursue their fitness goal when they focused on its pursuit in the future relative to the present ($M_{future} = 5.26$, $M_{present} = 4.47$; F (1, 138) = 5.48, $p < .05$).

Mediation by confidence and boredom. A 2 (goal progress) X 2 (temporal cue) ANOVA on confidence in goal achievement revealed a main effect of temporal cue (F (1, 138) = 4.81, p < .05), qualified by an interaction between goal progress and temporal cue (F (1, 138) = 6.10, $p < .001$; see Figure 3). Low progress participants reported being more confident that they would achieve their fitness goal when they focused on goal pursuit in the present versus future *(*$M_{present} = 5.32$, $M_{future} = 4.19$; F (1, 138) = 11.89, $p < .001$). No such effect emerged in the high goal progress condition ($M_{future} = 5.00$, $M_{present} = 4.93$; F < 1).

A 2 (goal progress) X 2 (temporal cue) ANOVA on boredom with goal pursuit revealed an interaction between goal progress and temporal cue (F (1, 138) = 24.22, $p < .001$; see Figure 4). High progress participants reported being less bored with pursuing their fitness goal when they focused on goal pursuit in the future versus present ($M_{future} = 3.03$, $M_{present} = 4.10$; F (1, 138) = 5.93, $p < .05$). No such effect emerged in the low goal progress condition ($M_{present} = 2.85$, $M_{future} = 3.44$; F (1, 138) = 2.14, $p > .1$).

To test hypotheses 1b and 2b, we ran a moderated mediation analysis [1]with confidence in goal achievement and boredom with goal pursuit as simultaneous mediators of the impact of goal progress and temporal cue on motivation. We used biased-corrected bootstrapping (n = 5000, see Preacher & Hayes, 2008) to generate 95% confidence intervals around these indirect effects (excitement and stability), where successful mediation occurs if the confidence intervals exclude zero (Hayes, 2009; Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007).

Results support the predicted moderated mediation, with confidence and boredom simultaneously mediating the effects of goal progress and temporal cue on motivation. Specifically, confidence in goal achievement mediated the effect of temporal cue on motivation in the low progress condition (indirect effect = -.60; 95% CI: -.98 to -.27), but not in the high progress condition (indirect effect = .04; 95% CI: -.35 to .47). In contrast, anticipated boredom with goal pursuit mediated the effect of temporal cue in the high progress condition (indirect

[1] Moderated mediation tests whether the underlying process that causes (i.e., mediates) the effect of an independent variable on the dependent variable depends on the level of another variable. In this case, moderated mediation tests whether the underlying process that leads to the effect of temporal focus on motivation depends on what level of progress consumers perceive they have made toward goal attainment.

effect = -.11, 95% CI: .01 to .52), but not in the low progress condition (indirect effect = .20; 95% CI: -.30 to .01).

Discussion

Study 2 provides support for the proposed underlying mechanism driving the effects of goal progress and temporal cue on motivation. Results indicate that consumers who perceive low progress towards goal attainment were more motivated by focusing on goal pursuit in the present (vs. future) because doing so increases their confidence in being able to achieve the goal. In contrast, consumers who perceive high progress towards goal attainment were more motivated by focusing on goal pursuit in the future (vs. present) because doing so decreases their boredom with goal pursuit.

In the next two studies, we direct our focus to understanding how to aid low progress consumers in maintaining a high level of motivation to pursue their goals. Though it is important to sustain motivation at both low and high levels of goal progress, it is typically easier for consumers to stay motivated once they perceive they have made progress toward goal attainment (Lewin, 1935, 1951; Kivetz et al. 2006). Moreover, if goal disengagement were to occur, consumers who have made low (vs. high) goal progress would be worse off, in that they have made less progress to date. For example, if an individual who strives to lose 20 pounds stops a new exercise routine after losing only 2 pounds, this person is worse off in absolute terms than one who stops after losing 18 pounds. For these reasons, we address how to boost the motivation of low-progress consumers.

Study 3a: Moderation by Self-Efficacy at Low Levels of Goal Progress

There are three objectives of study 3a. First, we seek additional evidence for the role of confidence in goal attainment in driving our effects. To this end, we measure participants' overall confidence in their ability to accomplish their goals (i.e., chronic "self-efficacy") and test for moderation of this individual-difference variable at low and high levels of goal progress. We expect that among participants who perceive low progress towards goal attainment, focusing on the present (vs. future) should have a particularly strong effect on motivation for those low in

chronic self-efficacy. Low-progress participants high on chronic self-efficacy should already feel confident in achieving their goal and thus should benefit less from a near future temporal cue.

Second, in study 3a we wish to show that our effects of goal progress and temporal cue on motivation generalize to a third goal domain, academic goals. We asked participants to complete an anagram task, described as an indicator of their academic performance, and assessed motivation by measuring participants' performance on the task.

Finally, we seek to address the role of a possible alternative explanation in driving our effects. A large body of research shows that thinking about the present versus future tends to change how concretely versus abstractly consumers think about the consumption experience at hand (Trope and Liberman 2000; 2003), where thinking about the present (vs. future) leads people to think of their experience more concretely (vs. abstractly). We do not believe that our obtained effects on motivation are due to differences in concrete versus abstract thinking. To disentangle the impact of temporal cue from abstraction level, in study 3a we ask participants to think concretely about goal pursuit in the present versus future. Replicating our basic effects with such a manipulation would suggest that time, rather than thinking concretely versus abstractly, differently impacts motivation across stages of goal pursuit.

Design and method

One hundred and ninety-four students at a large East Coast university participated in this study in exchange for course credit. We randomly assigned participants to condition in a 2 (goal progress: low, high) X 2 (temporal cue: present, future) X 2 (self-efficacy: low, high) mixed design, where goal progress and temporal cue were manipulated and chronic self-efficacy was a measured variable.

First, we asked participants if they were currently pursuing an academic goal (all participants indicated that they had this goal). Then, we manipulated perceived progress towards the savings goal. Similar to the manipulation used in studies 1 and 2, we asked participants how many hours they studied each day ("How many hours do you typically spend studying each day, not including the time you spend in class?) and varied the provided response scale. In the low progress condition, we gave participants the following response options, intended to induce a low sense of goal progress: "5 or fewer", "6-7", "8-9", "10 or more." In contrast, we gave

participants in the high progress condition the following response options, intended to induce a high sense of goal progress: “0”, “1”, “2”, “3 or more.”

Next, we asked all participants to think concretely about what they could do to achieve their academic goal. In the present condition, we asked participants to list steps they could take to achieve their academic goal over the course of the next week. In contrast, in the future condition, we asked participants to list steps they could take to achieve their academic goal over the rest of the semester (approximately seven weeks from the time the study was administered).

After listing steps to achieving their academic goal, participants proceeded to the anagram task, our dependent measure, and to the chronic self-efficacy scale (see Table 1, following References). We told participants that the anagram task was developed by psychologists to be an indicator of academic performance, thereby positioning the task as related to participants’ academic goal. The task consisted of 10 difficult but solvable anagrams (e.g., SDETRE solved DESERT or DETERS; adapted from Shah, Higgins, and Friedman 1998). We presented the anagrams to participants one at a time, and on each page we gave them the option to view the next anagram or to quit the task. The number of anagrams solved correctly served as our dependent measure of interest.

To measure participants’ chronic self-efficacy, we had them complete a 10-item general self-efficacy inventory (Jerusalem and Schwarzer 1992). These measures were combined (α = .89) to form a composite measure of self-efficacy. The order of the anagram task and self-efficacy measures was counterbalanced across participants: half of participants completed the anagram task prior to the self-efficacy measures, whereas the remaining half of participants completed the self-efficacy measures prior to the anagram task.

Results

A regression of the number of correctly-solved anagrams on goal progress, temporal cue, chronic self-efficacy (mean-centered), and their interactions revealed a significant effect of self-efficacy (β = -1.66, t = -2.39, $p < .05$), a significant interaction between self-efficacy and goal progress (β = 2.50, t = 2.67, $p < .01$), a significant interaction between self-efficacy and temporal cue (β = 2.53, t = 3.09, $p < .01$), qualified by a three-way interaction between self-efficacy, goal

progress, and temporal cue (β = -3.22, t = -2.76, $p < .01$). To explore the nature of this interaction, we ran separate analyses at low and high levels of goal progress.

As we expected, the interaction between temporal cue and self-efficacy was significant in the low goal progress condition (β = 2.53, t = 3.22, $p < .01$; see Figure 5), whereas the interaction pattern failed to reach significance in the high goal progress condition ($p > .25$). To determine whether the impact of temporal cue on motivation varied across chronic self-efficacy levels among low progress participants, we conducted spotlight analyses ± 1 SD from the mean of self-efficacy in this condition. Supporting our theory, low progress participants who were low in self-efficacy correctly solved a greater number of anagrams when they focused on pursuing their academic goal in the present versus future ($M_{present}$ = 7.8, M_{future} = 6.3; t = -2.24, $p < .05$). In contrast, though not predicted a priori, low progress participants who were high in self-efficacy correctly solved a greater number of anagrams when focused on pursuing their academic goal in the future versus present (M_{future} = 7.4, $M_{present}$ = 5.9; t = 2.33, $p < .05$).

Discussion

The results of study 3a provide additional support for the role of confidence in goal achievement in driving the effect of temporal cue on motivation at low levels of perceived progress. Participants led to perceive they had made low progress toward their academic goal were more motivated to work on an academic goal-related task (solving anagrams) by a present versus future cue when low in chronic self-efficacy. In contrast, low progress participants high in chronic self-efficacy exhibited the opposite pattern of results. Though we did not predict this reversal a priori, it is consistent with our argument that concerns regarding goal achievement are the primary driver of motivation at low levels of goal progress. Moreover, that we obtain support for our hypotheses while activating a concrete mindset for all participants suggests that construal level does not play a causal role in driving our effects. Next, in our final study, we seek additional support for the moderating role of self-efficacy among consumers who perceive low progress towards goal attainment by manipulating rather than measuring self-efficacy. In addition, this next study examines whether an intervention to boost self-efficacy is particularly helpful for low progress consumers who have adopted a future focus for goal pursuit.

Study 3b: Bolstering Self-Efficacy Enhances Motivation with Future Focus

Study 3b tests whether concerns regarding the likelihood of goal achievement play a causal role in leading low progress consumers to be demotivated when thinking about goal pursuit in the future (vs. present). Specifically, in this study we examine whether bolstering consumers' sense of self-efficacy through an experimental intervention attenuates the negative effect of future focus on motivation when perceived progress towards goal attainment is low.

Design and method

One hundred and forty-five students at a large East Coast university participated in this study in exchange for course credit. We randomly assigned participants to condition in a 2 (efficacy intervention: control, bolstered efficacy) X 2 (temporal cue: present, future) between-subjects design.

First, we used a previously-demonstrated technique to make participants feel as if they had made low progress towards achieving their savings goal.[2] Participants reported their perceptions of goal progress on a 100-point sliding scale that decreased from left to right (100 = *you have fully attained your goal*, 0 = *you have not made any progress toward attaining your goal;* see Figure 6). Next, we manipulated the temporal cue. In the present condition, participants completed a short term planning for money scale (Lynch et al. 2010), whereas in the future condition, participants completed a long term planning for money scale (Lynch et al. 2010).

Prior to reporting their motivation to save money, we directed half of participants to describe a time when they were successfully able to achieve a goal to save money to buy something they wanted (bolstered efficacy condition). The remaining half of participants instead described a time they saw something they wanted to buy (control condition). After finishing the

[2] We asked participants to report how much progress they had made towards achieving their savings goal ("How much progress have you made towards achieving your savings goal?") on a 100-point sliding scale. To manipulate perceived progress, we varied the anchors of response scales provided for this question. In the low progress condition, we oriented the sliding scale such that the scale decreased from left to right (100 = *you have fully attained your goal*, 0 = *you have not made any progress toward attaining your goal*). We reversed these anchors in the high progress condition. A pre-test (N = 70) verified our progress manipulation, showing that participants perceived having made more progress towards their savings goal ("I have made a lot of progress towards achieving my savings goal" "I have made little progress towards achieving my savings goal" 1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*; α = .91) in the high versus low progress condition (M_{high} = 4.32, M_{low} = 3.74; $F(1, 68) = 4.39$, $p < .05$).

elaboration task, participants reported their motivation to save money ("How motivated do you feel to save money?") on a seven-point scale (1 = *Not at all motivated*, 7 = *Very motivated*).

Results and discussion

A 2 (goal progress) X 2 (temporal cue) ANOVA on savings motivation revealed the predicted interaction between goal progress and temporal cue ($F(1, 141) = 5.36$, $p < .05$; see figure 7). Consistent with the pattern of results obtained in our prior studies, participants in the control (low progress) condition reported being more motivated to save money when prompted to consider planning for the present versus future ($M_{present} = 5.97$, $M_{future} = 5.21$; $F(1, 141) = 4.89$, $p < .05$). In contrast, there was no difference in motivation to save money across temporal cue conditions when we temporarily bolstered participants' sense of self-efficacy prior to their reporting their motivation ($M_{future} = 5.88$, $M_{present} = 5.53$; $F(1, 141) = 1.09$, $p > .2$).

Looking at the data a different way, whereas participants focused on goal pursuit in the future were less motivated in the control versus bolstered efficacy condition ($M_{control} = 5.21$, $M_{bolstered\ efficacy} = 5.88$; $F(1, 141) = 3.92$, $p < .05$), there was no such difference among participants focused on goal pursuit in the present ($F < 1$). In sum, these results provide additional evidence that adopting a present (vs. future) focus increases motivation among low progress consumers by making them feel more confident in achieving their goal. Further, we find that consumers who have adopted a future focus for goal pursuit are more motivated when an intervention bolsters their sense of self-efficacy to achieve their goals.

General Discussion

Consumer motivation often changes over the course of goal pursuit, as consumers make progress toward attaining their goal. Those who have made considerable progress often feel more motivated in goal pursuit than do those who have made limited progress (Kivetz et al. 2006). However, even consumers who have made substantial progress sometimes find it difficult to maintain their motivation (Fishbach and Dhar 2005). What interventions might encourage both low and high progress consumers to stay motivated toward obtaining their goals?

This paper explored one factor that differentially impacts the motivation of low and high progress consumers: cues to focus on the present versus future. We proposed that whereas a focus on the present (vs. future) is more motivating to low progress consumers, a focus on the future (vs. present) is more motivating to high progress consumers. We further argue that a present (vs. future) focus is more motivating for low progress consumers because it best overcomes concerns regarding goal achievement, and that a future (vs. present) focus is more motivating for high progress consumers because it best overcomes concerns regarding complacency.

Four main studies and one pilot study provide support for these predictions. Participants in our pilot study were more likely to register for a real website to pursue financial savings goals when they perceived they had made low (high) progress toward their savings goal and were asked to think about saving money right now (over the next year). Study 1 replicated this pattern using experimental manipulations of both perceived progress and temporal focus on the present versus future, and a different goal domain (physical fitness). The remaining three studies, including one using another goal domain – academic goals - explored the proposed mediators of these effects. Specifically, study 2 demonstrated that confidence in goal achievement mediates the impact of temporal cue on motivation among low progress consumers, and that anticipated complacency with goal pursuit mediates the impact of temporal cue on motivation among high progress consumers. Goal achievement (complacency) concerns did not play a role at high (low) levels of goal progress.

The final studies focused specifically on helping low progress consumers maintain a high level of motivation, as considerable research shows that overall motivation is generally lower among those who perceive they have made little progress. Results of study 3a and 3b indicated that (measured and manipulated) perceived self-efficacy plays a causal role in driving the diminished motivation of low progress consumers who are cued to focus on the future; effects of self-efficacy are eliminated among low progress consumers who are cued to focus on the present and among those whose self-efficacy is externally boosted.

Our findings contribute to the literatures on goal pursuit, goal progress, and temporal focus. Thus far, literatures on goal pursuit and temporal focus have been largely distinct, with relatively more attention paid to the goal progress dynamic than the temporal focus dynamic (Etkin and Ratner 2013). As far as we know, ours is the first demonstration that temporal cues to focus on

the present versus future impact consumer motivation over the course of goal pursuit. We focused here on how temporal cues impact motivation as a function of consumers' perceived level of progress toward goal pursuit, and find that these interact in a significant way.

These findings have a number of managerial implications. Marketers benefit from understanding how to keep consumers motivated to pursue their goals, because doing so increases their consumption of goal-related products and services. For instance, as suggested by our pilot study, when consumers with savings goals are more motivated to save money, they become more likely to utilize financial services; we specifically looked at the propensity to sign up for an online savings program, but would expect similar results for contracting a financial planner, etc.

Our results specifically suggest that the strategies and tactics marketers should use to enhance motivation of target customers will depend on consumers' perceptions of the level of progress toward goal attainment they have reached. For consumers who perceive low progress, marketers can increase motivation by prompting them to focus on the present. Using language such as "enroll today" or "get started now" may encourage low progress consumers to purchase goal-related products and services. Short-term promotions ("today only") may be particularly effective for these people. Alternatively, for consumers who perceive high progress, marketers can increase consumer motivation by prompting them to focus on the future. For this group, using language such as "enroll for one year" or "get started next month" may encourage desired purchasing behavior.

In addition to providing insight into how progress and time dynamics interact to impact consumer motivation, our research raises a number of interesting questions for future research. We have opted to focus on motivating low progress consumers in particular, but interesting questions can also be asked in terms of how to motivate high progress consumers. For instance, we speculate that the effects might change as a function of the type of goal consumers pursue: an ongoing goal, such as goals to live comfortably or be healthy that we discussed in this paper, or a one-shot goal, such as losing 10 pounds or saving for a new car. Whereas we find support for our prediction regarding the impact of a future (vs. present) focus on motivation for ongoing goals, it is possible that we would obtain different results for one-shot goals where high-progress consumers might be less likely to experience complacency. Perhaps for a one-shot goal, high-

progress consumers (like low-progress consumers) are more motivated when thinking about goal pursuit now versus over a longer time horizon.

Additional future work could examine how long these effects last – how long consumers stay motivated when thinking about the present versus the long-term – and how these effects play out in the real world. Field studies to examine goal-related consumption behavior of low versus high-progress consumers focused on the present versus the long-term should address these issues. Such studies could track motivation over time and include interventions (such as on a mobile device) to change consumers' focus on the short-term versus long-term as they move toward making progress toward their consumption goal.

This paper brings together prior work on how goal-directed motivation evolves dynamically, over the course of goal pursuit and over time, to shed new light on how these dynamics might jointly impact consumer behavior. By considering variation in stage of goal pursuit as well as temporal focus of goal pursuit together, our research advances recent work calling for a more dynamic understanding of how consumers interact with their environments to pursue their goals.

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Table 1. Self-Efficacy Scale (Jerusalem and Schwarzer 1992)

Participants report the extent to which each statement is true for them, where 1 = *not at all true* and 5 = *exactly true*:

I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough.
If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want.
It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals.
I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.
Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations.
I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort.
I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.
When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions.
If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution.
I can usually handle whatever comes my way.

Figure 1

Effects of Goal Progress and Temporal Cue on Fitness Motivation (Study 1)

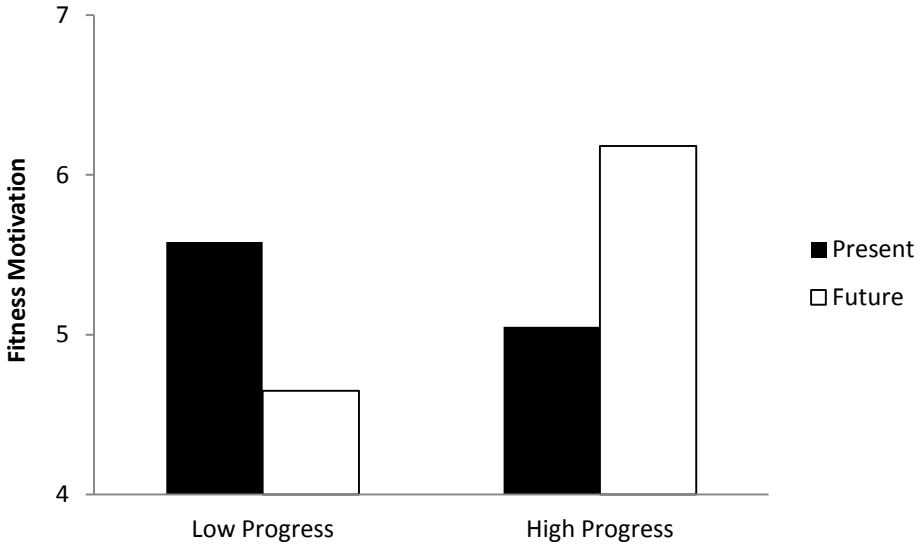

Figure 2

Effects of Goal Progress and Temporal Cue on Fitness Motivation (Study 2)

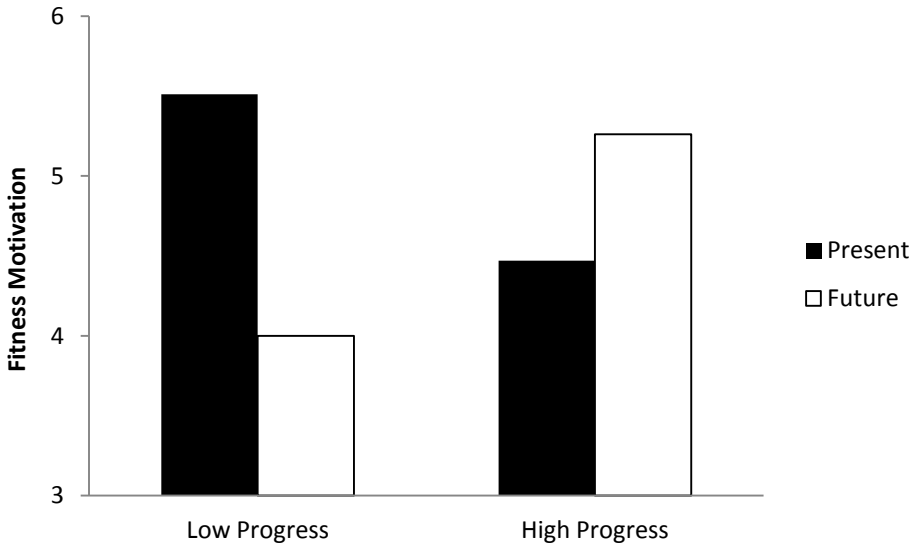

Figure 3

Effects of Goal Progress and Temporal Cue on Perceptions of Goal Attainability (Study 2)

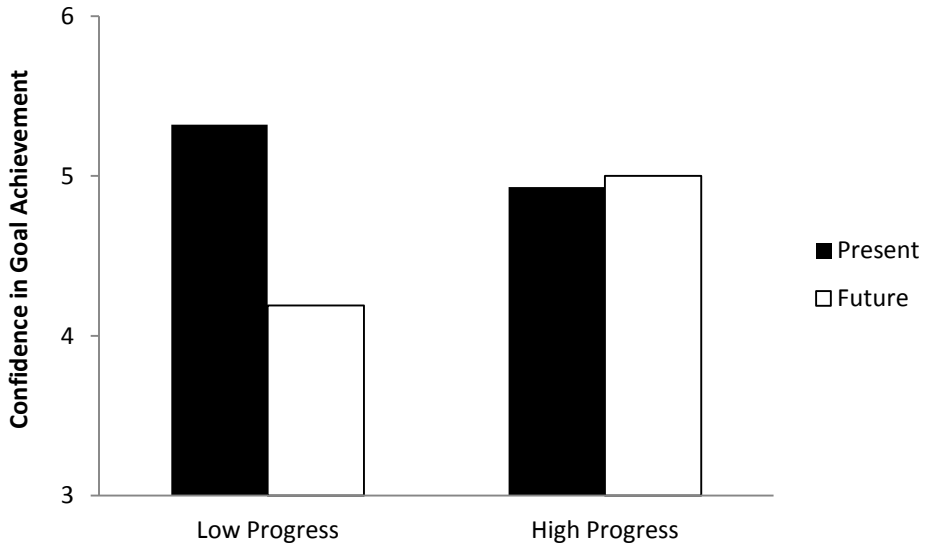

Figure 4

Effects of Goal Progress and Temporal Cue on Feelings of Boredom (Study 2)

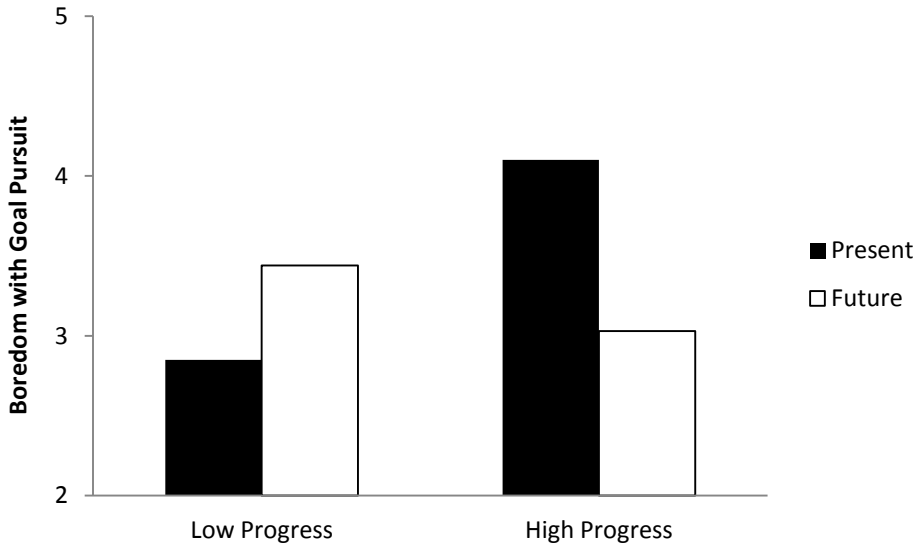

Figure 5

Chronic Self-Efficacy Moderates Effects of Motivation at Low Levels of Perceived Goal Progress (Study 3a)

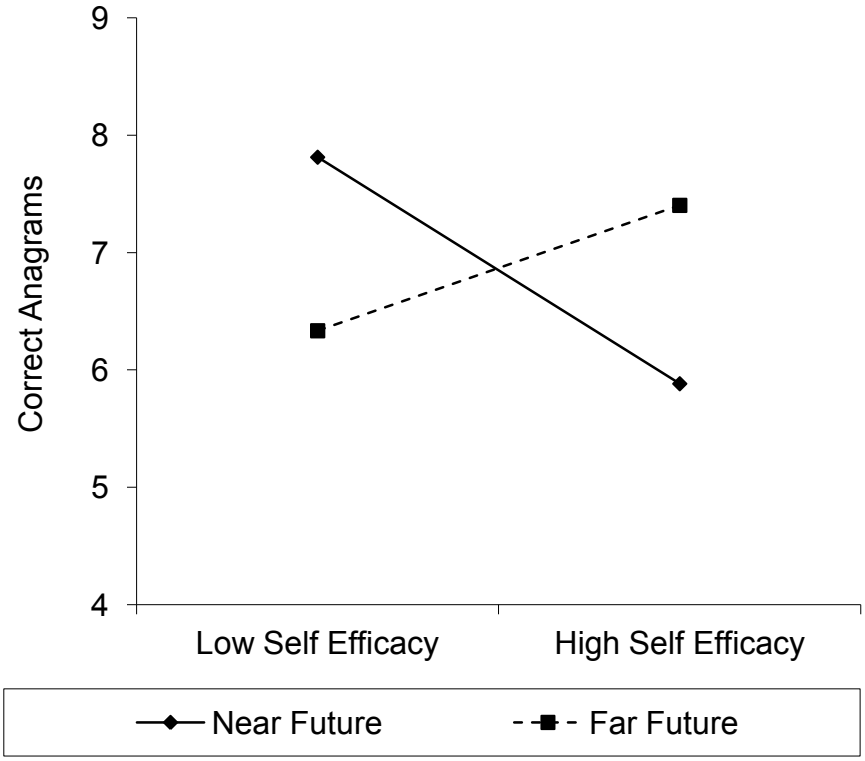

Figure 6

Sliding Scale Used to Induce Low Progress (Study 3b)

How much progress have you made towards achieving your savings goal? Please use the slider scale below to indicate your progress, where 100 = you have fully attained your goal and 0 = you have not made any progress toward attaining your goal.

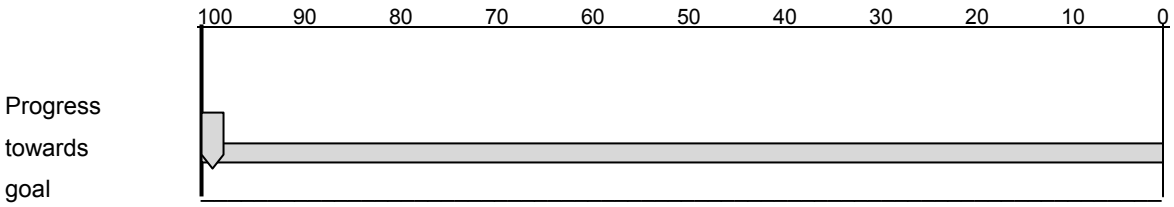

Figure 7

Self-Efficacy Moderates Effects on Motivation at Low Levels of Goal Progress (Study 3b)