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THE DIVERGENT EFFECTS  
OF EXTERNAL SYSTEMS OF CONTROL  
ON EARLY STAGE GOAL PURSUIT\*

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

### Abstract

This research demonstrates divergent effects of reminding consumers that their long-term goals occurs within external systems of control. We showed that such reminders can increase or decrease motivation in pursuing savings goals depending on the level of specificity with which they are planned.

### Keywords

brand, goal pursuit, control, religion, religiosity, God

There is a generalized belief that external sources of control are detrimental to goal pursuit. Past research 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. On the one hand, research in psychological reactance emphasizes that imbuing one's environment with rules and guidelines may be perceived as a threat to one's freedom. In responses to such controlled environments, s/he experiences a motivational state directed toward reattaining the restricted freedom (Fitzsimons and Lehman 2004). On the other hand, Laurin, Kay and Fitzsimons (2012) recently showed that activating thoughts of a controlling God negatively affected goal pursuit. Consistent with research in social loafing, they have argued that when the responsibility of the outcomes is shared with others (e.g., an omnipotent God), people see those outcomes as contingent not only on their own but also on others' decisions and behaviors. They tend then to devote less effort toward their goals.

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) with very specific implementations, they experience low self-efficacy due to the anticipated efforts and obstacles that such a type of planning underlies. Then, thinking about external systems of control should flip or reverse the negative effect of specific planning on motivation by heightening perceived goal attainability.

The negative effect of specific plan formats on motivation in goal pursuit has been a recent focus of interest in consumer research. Ülkümen and Cheema (2011) found that specifying an exact amount undermines savings intentions when consumers focus on the way to achieve their goal in comparison to a focus on the reasons motivating their savings goal. While positing that specific planning focuses people on constraints to goal execution, Dalton and Spiller (2012) suggested that specific plans are especially harmful for multiple goals, compared to a single one. Other research found that planning concrete implementations was a source of motivation when people were close to goal achievement, but a source of demotivation when levels of progress were low (Townsend and Liu 2012). Indeed, long-term goals are subject to the goal gradient effect which suggests that the larger the gap is between

one's current standing and the desirable end state, the less people are motivated to pursue their goals. However, goal distance alone may not explain that negative correlation. In accordance with Townsend and Liu (2012), we suggest that rather than distance, in and of itself, it may rather be what distance *implies* – in terms of effort investment and obstacles to overcome – that negatively impacts motivation at early stages of goal pursuit. To the extent this is so, then anything that makes the individual feel like effort investment is worthwhile should lessen the distance effect. 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. In fact, people have a fundamental need to perceived the world as orderly and non-random. However, even though that need is considered relatively constant across individual, personal control (i.e., one's perceived ability to produced by his/her own means the expected outcomes) varies across individuals and situations (Kay et al. 2008, Whitson and Galinsky, 2008). 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 some sort of 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). For instance, Kay and colleagues (e.g., Kay et al. 2008, 2010) showed that when feelings of personal control are lowered, people expressed higher beliefs in a controlling God and stronger support for governmental control. They show as well that, when feelings of personal control are low, external sources of control can fluidly compensate for one another (Kay et al. 2010).

## **1. Hypotheses and overview of studies**

In the consumer-relevant context of savings goals we examine if the usual decrement in motivation that is observed when a goal is set with specific plan formats, will dissipate when people are reminded that goal pursuit occurs within external systems of control. We posit that at early stages of goal-pursuit, consumers have a greater inclination to abandon their savings goals if they are planned in a specific (*vs.* vague) way because of lower feelings of self-efficacy (i.e., perceived capability to achieve a goal [Bandura 1994]). Thus, when planning is specific, reminding people that goal pursuit occurs within an external system of control should increase motivation because despite these low feelings of self-efficacy, the goal should

be perceived as attainable. However, when planning is vague, such a reminder should decrease motivation in goal pursuit. In this case, vague plan formats should make what seems an easy goal not worthwhile the trouble of investing efforts. Things being overall under control, the goal should appear in itself attainable. Table 1 summaries the five studies we conducted to test these hypotheses.

The effect of external systems of control on goal pursuit in situation of high progress is beyond the scope of this research because the mechanisms described above are based on perceived goal attainability. Yet, when nearing goal attainment, concerns are no longer focused on outcome expectancy, but on factors such as goal importance (Zhang and Huang 2010) and goal velocity (Huang and Zhang 2011).

**Table 1: 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"> <li>- When planning is specific, reminder of external system of control increases goal motivation</li> <li>- When planning is vague, reminder of external system of control reduces goal motivation</li> <li>- Hypothesis not supported with a creating God (as expected)</li> </ul>
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"> <li>- Hypothesis supported with a reliable brand as external system of control</li> <li>- Hypothesis not supported with a trustworthy brand (as expected)</li> </ul>

## 2. Study 1

**Objectives and design.** Study 1 provided initial evidence for our hypotheses using a controlling God as external system. To demonstrate that it is in fact an external system of control that produces the expected effect and not merely religious beliefs, study 1 used a 2 (planning: specific *vs.* vague) x 3 (external system: controlling God *vs.* creating God *vs.* baseline) between-subjects design.

**Participants.** We recruited 204 Americans to participate in a study online (female: 74%, median age: 33). Participants identified themselves as Christian (52.5%), non denominational (40.7%), Hindu (2.0%), Jewish (1.5%), Muslim (0.5%), and other (2.9%). Atheists (n = 15) were removed from sampling because (1) a controlling God is *de facto* an irrelevant external system of control and (2) a God-based prime would likely cause an unfavorable attitude toward the rest of the study. (This practice remained for studies 2 and 3. Note that for all, results remained unchanged before and after removal.)

**Procedure.** In order to manipulate salience of beliefs in a controlling God, participants were first invited to read a short text under the pretence of passing a reading test whose purpose was to evaluate their power of concentration. The content of this article (ostensibly from the review *Science*) argued that recent research found that it is scientifically possible for a God-like entity to either (1) intervene in the world's affairs to bring order to the universe, or (2) have created the world we live in. The neutral article was about recent advances in images of space. After the article, participants were asked to choose the closest meaning of four key words in the text, among four propositions. Participants with only 0, 1 or 2 good answers were automatically screened out at the time of survey completion as the probability for them to pass the test by chance only was 94.9%. Afterward, participants were invited to what was presented as the true study which consisted in reading a short scenario. In both planning conditions, participants were asked to imagine they had a job with reasonable payment, and despite very little by way of savings, they were starting to look ahead. In the vague planning condition, they read that their financial adviser introduced them to a new savings program by which they had to commit in advance to allocating a portion of their future salary for a time period. In the specific planning condition, they were told that the program required them to deposit a monthly fixed amount (minimum \$300) for ten years. In both condition, participants were provided assurance of a guaranteed rate of return of 4%. Then, they reported their motivation to respect the requirements of the savings program with a three-item measure, on a

series on 7-point scales ( $\alpha = .99$ ). This last manipulation was pretested ( $n = 95$ ) on perceived self-efficacy such that participants in the specific planning condition expressed lower levels than the others ( $t(93) = 2.57, p = .01$ ).

**Results.** A two-way ANOVA yielded a significant interactional effect  $F(5, 198) = 2.26, p = .05$ . Orthogonal planned comparisons revealed as expected that when participants faced a specific kind of planning, reminding them in the first place of a controlling God lead to significantly higher levels of motivation relative to the neutral condition ( $t(198) = 1.94, p = .05, M_{\text{controlling God}} = 5.27$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = 4.48$ ), and relative to the creating God condition ( $t(198) = 2.03, p = .04, M_{\text{creating God}} = 4.50$ ). Secondly and as expected, we found that when planning was vague, participants reminded of a controlling God were significantly less motivated than those in the neutral condition ( $t(198) = -2.12, p = .04, M_{\text{controlling God}} = 4.65$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = 5.39$ ).

### 3. Study 2

**Objectives and design.** In study 2, we tested our hypotheses with two main differences relative to study 1: (1) we asked participants to plan the pursuit of a personal savings goal and (2) we varied the degree of specificity. As such, study 2 used a 2 (planning: moderately specific vs. very specific) x 2 (external system: controlling God vs. baseline) between-subjects design.

**Participants.** We recruited 161 Americans to participate in a study online (female: 71.4%, median age: 33). Participants identified themselves as Christian (55.3%), non denominational (37.3%), Hindu (1.9%), Jewish (1.9%), and other (3.1%) (Atheists:  $n = 18$ ).

**Procedure.** We used the same procedure described in study 1 to prime reminder of external system of control. After the reading test, participants were invited to list one savings goal they had not started to pursue at the time of the survey completion, but intended to accomplish six months from now. In the moderately specific planning condition, participants were asked to select one of six sums they needed for their project (e.g., less than \$500, \$500 to \$999). In the very specific planning condition, they were asked to enter the savings amount and thereafter to plan their savings in numeric terms. Hence, in both conditions participants were asked to plan their ability to save money for a chosen goal, but in one condition (moderately specific), this was asked globally and only a range was specified whereas in the other (very specific), this was asked at a very specific level for each month of the six months to come and in exact terms. Finally, participants were asked how much effort they intended to devote toward their

savings goal and how committed they were to pursuing their savings goal. Both items were measure on a 7-point scale and averaged to form a reliable index ( $\alpha = .78$ ). We pretested this manipulation on self-efficacy ( $n = 71$ ) and found that participants in the very specific condition expressed lower levels than the others ( $t(69) = 2.89, p < .01$ ).

**Results.** Controlling for age, income and goal importance, a regression analysis revealed a significant interactional effect on savings motivation ( $\beta = .16, t(152) = 2.52, p = .01$ ). In addition, we found a significant simple effect of type of planning on savings motivation when participants were asked to read the neutral article (Effect =  $-.41, p = .05, M_{\text{moderately specific}} = 6.02$  vs.  $M_{\text{very specific}} = 5.60$ ). Consistent with our preliminary assumption, without reminders of religious control, participants asked to plan very specifically were significantly less motivated than those asked to plan their goal with high-low ranges. Secondly, we found a significant simple effect of external system on savings motivation when participants were asked to plan very specifically (Effect =  $.43, p = .03, M_{\text{controlling God}} = 6.04$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = 5.61$ ). As such, participants asked to plan their savings goal very specifically were significantly more motivated in its pursuit when they had been reminded of a controlling God, while such reminders had no effect for participants asked to plan with high-low ranges.

#### 4. Study 3

**Objectives and design.** The purpose of study 3 was to test the mechanism behind the effects detected so far. As such, study 3 used a 3 (planning: no planning vs. moderately specific vs. very specific) x 2 (external system: controlling God vs. baseline) between-subjects design.

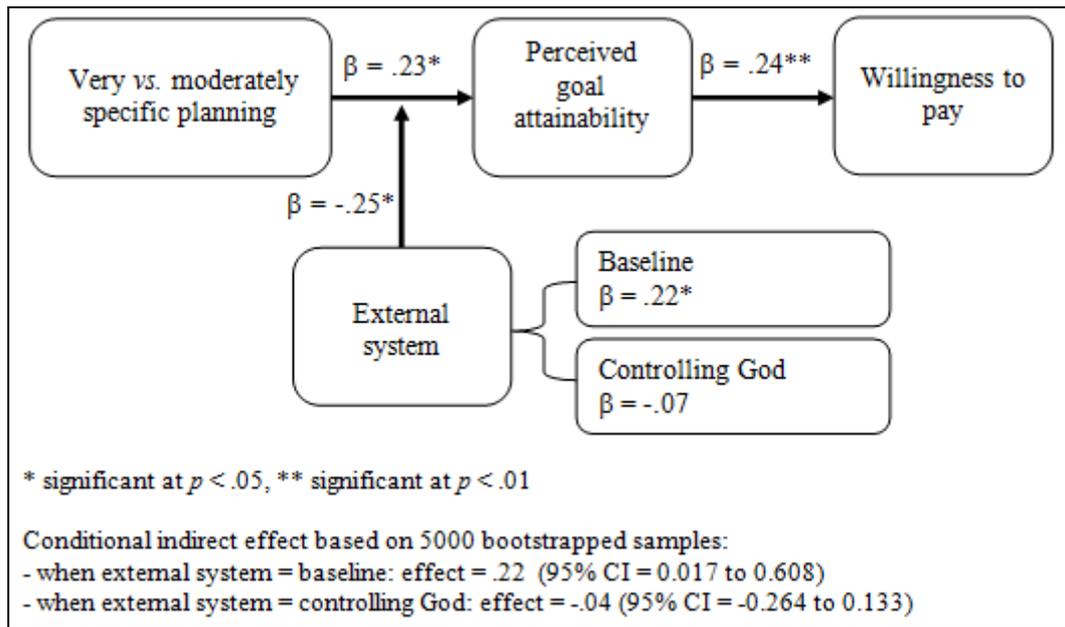
**Participants.** We recruited 194 Americans to participate in a study online (female: 73.7%, median age: 35). Participants identified themselves as Christian (55.2%), non denominational (32.0%), Jewish (3.1%), Buddhist (2.6%), Hindu (1.5%), Muslim (0.5%) and other (5.2%) (Atheists:  $n = 18$ ).

**Procedure.** Reminder that goal pursuit occurs within an external system of control was primed as done in studies 1 and 2. After the reading test, participants were told that we conducted a survey aiming at getting a better knowledge of Americans' savings habits in order to market an housing budgeting app. Accordingly, they were first asked to list a savings goal they had just begun to pursue or had not started yet but intended to pursue soon. In both the moderately and very specific planning condition, participants were asked to enter the amount that their project required before reading a piece of information ostensibly from USA

Today, under the pretense of a possible tagline for our marketing campaign. In the moderately specific condition, participants were told that recent developments in behavioral economics found that successful savings goals result from saving as much as possible, in other words, saving what is not spent. In the very specific condition, they read that successful savings goals result from saving a predetermined proportion of the household income after taxes by automatic transfers into a savings plan; the rule of thumb being to save 15% of the net salary for one savings goal. To make participants plan their savings goal accordingly, they were subsequently asked to indicate how likely they thought they would be able to follow through their savings goal after planning their savings habits according to what they just read. This question served to measure perceived goal attainability (7-point scale, 1 = not at all likely, 7 = extremely likely). This item was adapted for participants in the no planning condition. Then, participants were told that we needed their help to market an app designed to assist people in budgeting their household income. After description of its functionalities, participants were asked how willing they would be to buy the app if they were asked to, on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all willing, 7 = extremely willing). The manipulation of planning was pretested ( $n = 91$ ) on perceived self-efficacy. Results showed that participants in the very specific planning condition were significantly less confident in their ability to pursue their savings goal relative to those in the moderately specific condition ( $t(85) = 2.23, p = .03$ ). No difference was detected relative to those in the no planning condition.

**Results.** Controlling for age, income, goal importance, orthogonal planned comparisons revealed that among participants asked to pass the neutral reading test, those who planned their savings goal very specifically perceived it as significantly less attainable than the others ( $t(185) = -2.30, p = .02, M_{\text{very specific}} = 4.73$  vs.  $M_{\text{others}} = 5.42$ ). As expected, no difference was detected among participants reminded of a controlling God. Secondly, after taking into account ownership of a mobile device besides the previous covariates, we found that participants asked to plan their savings goal very specifically were significantly more willing to buy the app only when they had been reminded of a controlling God ( $t(184) = 2.04, p = .04, M_{\text{controlling God}} = 4.00$  vs.  $M_{\text{baseline}} = 2.88$ ). Finally, evidence for the proposed mechanism for those effects was provided by a moderated mediation analysis as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Moderated mediation analysis (study 3)**



## 5. Study 4A

**Objectives and design.** In study 4A, we considered brands as external systems of control within which goal pursuit may occur. As such, we tested the compensatory relationship between a controlling God and brands when consumers cope with control threats. Study 4A used a 2 (planning: vague vs. specific) x Continuous (belief in a controlling God) between-subjects design.

**Participants.** We recruited 151 Americans to participate in a study online (female: 74.8%, median age: 33). Participants identified themselves as Christian (46.2%), non denominational (36.6%), Atheist (6.2%), Jewish (4.8%), Hindu (.7%), Muslim (0.7%), and other (4.8%).

**Procedure.** Under the pretence of a survey conducted on behalf of BNP Paribas a retail banking institution without an operational network in the US, we asked first participants to list three savings goals they currently had but for which they had not started to save money yet (or just begun). At the difference of the vague planning condition, in the specific planning condition participants were asked to provide the amount of savings that their projects required. Afterwards, participants were presented an ad depicting a savings advice allegedly from Joseph Stiglitz (2001 Nobel prize of economics). Its content was approximately identical to the extract from USA Today in study 3. Participants were forced to wait 90 seconds before

moving on; time during which they were asked to complete an “anxiety thermometer” (Houtman and Bakker 1989), to assess their response to the ad (0 = not at all anxious, 10 = extremely anxious). Finally participants were asked to complete a measure designed to evaluate brand reliability, which we define as the consumer’s perception of a brand’s ability to make her reach her goals. (“To finance the projects you mentioned earlier...” “to what extent would you be willing to rely on the brand depicted in the ad?”, “to what extent do you think the brand depicted in the ad is able to get you there?”, and “to what extent do you think the brand depicted in the ad is dependable?”) on a series of 7-point scales. Responses were averaged to form a single index ( $\alpha = .89$ ). Within demographic questions, we measured beliefs in a controlling God (Laurin, Shariff, Henrich, and Kay 2012). No difference between conditions was detected ( $t(149) = -.68, p = .50$ ).

**Results.** Controlling for age, income, and goal importance, a moderated mediation analysis revealed a conditional indirect effect of planning on brand reliability through anxiety when beliefs in a controlling God were low (effect = .26 [95% CI = 0.006 to 0.591]). As expected, it was not significant when such beliefs were high. Thus, those who held weak beliefs in a controlling God compensated for their need for control – due to specific planning – by relying more on the advertised brand.

## 6. Study 4B

**Objectives and design.** Study 4B tested our hypotheses by priming the belief that brands can be viewed as overarching institutions that bring order into the consumers’ life. As such, we wanted to show (1) that the motivational effect of external system of control when planning is specific (*vs.* vague) remained despite heightened levels of psychological reactance, and (2) that relying on a brand for goal attainment does not necessarily imply holding beliefs about its trustworthiness. Study 4B used a 2 (planning: vague *vs.* specific) x 3 (external system: brand reliability *vs.* brand trust *vs.* baseline) between-subjects design.

**Participants.** We recruited 273 Americans to participate in a study online (female: 73.3%, median age: 35). Participants identified themselves as Christian (51.3%), non denominational (32.6%), Atheist (4.4%), Jewish (3.3%), Muslim (1.1%), Hindu (.4%), and other (4.8%).

**Procedure.** We conducted study 4B on behalf of a well-known banking institution with an operational retail network in America, without any more details. This, for the participants to remain agnostic as to whether the brand was their bank. To manipulate brand as an external

system of control, we first asked participants to evaluate separately three advertising phrases. They were each assessed on a series of four 9-point semantic differential scales asking whether the phrase made the brand appear friendly/hostile, libertarian/authoritarian, obtrusive/unobtrusive (reversed), and controlling/non-controlling (reversed). Afterwards, participants were invited to follow the same procedure used in study 4A to manipulate planning (except for the anxiety measure which was removed). Finally, among filler questions, we asked them how willing they were to engage in several financial activities (e.g., saving money on a regular basis, learning about money management regularly), in the following six months, on 7-point scales (1= very unlikely, 7= very likely). Responses were averaged to form a reliable index ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

**Results.** First, manipulation checks showed that when the banking institution was depicted as an agent bringing order into its clients' financial life, participants expressed that the brand appeared significantly more hostile, authoritarian, obtrusive, and controlling than when the brand was depicted as an honest and trustworthy agent. Second, a regression analysis revealed a significant change in explained variance after adding orthogonal planned comparisons to the control variables (age, income, and goal importance):  $\Delta R^2 = .04$ ,  $F$  Change (5, 261) = 2.61,  $p = .03$ . Accordingly, we found that when planning was vague, framing brands as external systems of control made participants less willing to engage in financial activities, relative to those in the baseline condition ( $t(264) = 2.71$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $M_{\text{brand reliability}} = 5.28$  vs.  $M_{\text{baseline}} = 5.77$ ). But when planning was specific, this made them more willing to do so, relative to those in the baseline condition ( $t(264) = -2.32$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $M_{\text{brand reliability}} = 5.74$  vs.  $M_{\text{baseline}} = 5.35$ ). Honing in on the specificity of this effect, when brands were only depicted as trustworthy agents, rather than controlling agents, no effects were obtained.

## 7. Brief discussion

This research demonstrates divergent effects of reminding consumers that their long-term goals occur within external systems of control. We showed that such reminders can increase or decrease motivation in pursuing savings goals depending on the level of specificity with which they are planned. We argued that at early stages of goal-pursuit, specific plan formats create control threats, born of the dynamics between low feelings of self-efficacy and uncertainty regarding goal attainability. Imbuing order and structure, such that consumers

perceived that things are overall under control, allowed to reverse the demotivational effect of specific planning.

To do so, we chose to prime beliefs in a controlling God and brand reliability; the former being justified by the robustness of religious beliefs throughout the world and the latter by the fact that most long-term goals involve an interaction between consumers and brands. However, other systems might be relevant and need to be taken into account in future research such as governmental intervention and social fabric. Moreover, though we remained agnostic regarding the effect of external sources of control at advanced stages of goal pursuit, this question needs a proper answer.

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, Ülkümen and Cheema 2011). This research studied a mechanism by which such a negative impact is not inevitable but can be reversed for the consumer well-being. Moreover, this research adds to the recent infusion of compensatory control research to understanding consumer behavior (e.g., Cutright 2012).

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