

The (Better) Road Not Taken: Setting a Goal Reduces Switching to More Effective Alternatives

ELIZABETH M. S. FRIEDMAN
GUY VOICHEK 
RAVI DHAR

We identify a novel way in which setting goals can backfire. In 13 studies and 4 supplemental studies, using both incentive-compatible and hypothetical designs across a range of domains, we demonstrate that setting an explicit goal and making progress toward it decreases the likelihood of switching to alternative means of pursuit. This occurs because means seem more effective relative to alternatives if they have been used to progress toward a reference point. Consistent with this mechanism, we show that the perceived effectiveness of the means used to pursue a goal, relative to an alternative, partially mediates the effect of setting a goal on the decision to switch means. Furthermore, the effect occurs only after people make initial progress toward a specified reference point. Setting a goal does not decrease switching if people are reminded to consider the advantages of both the initial and alternative means. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

Keywords: goals, motivation, alternatives, opportunity-cost, effectiveness, means-end

Consider two consumers who signed up for a healthy meal kit service. Before signing up, one person sets a

goal to consume 1,800 calories each day. The other does not set an explicit goal. After trying a few meals, they encounter a competing meal service with a reputation for offering more nutritious options. Who would be more likely to switch to the healthier meal kit service: the consumer who set an explicit goal or the one who did not?

Using the most effective means helps goal pursuit, yet inertia often prevents consumers from doing so (Suri et al. 2013). The current work shows that setting an explicit goal can exacerbate inertia. Across various goal types and contexts, we find that consumers are less likely to switch away from a means if it was used to pursue an explicit goal. Goals provide a reference point for monitoring progress (Carver and Scheier 1998; Heath, Larrick and Wu 1999). When consumers make progress toward an explicit goal (compared to making the same progress without setting a goal), they evaluate the means that they used to make progress (*initial means*) as more effective relative to alternatives that they did not use (*alternative means*). In our opening example, we therefore predict and find that the consumer who set an explicit goal will be less likely to

Elizabeth M. S. Friedman (e.friedman@columbia.edu) is Assistant Professor of Marketing, Columbia Business School, 650 West 131st Street, New York, NY 10027, USA; Guy Voichkek (g.voichkek@imperial.ac.uk) is Assistant Professor of Marketing, Imperial College Business School, South Kensington Campus, London SW7 2AZ, UK; Ravi Dhar (ravi.dhar@yale.edu) is George Rogers Clark Professor of Management and Marketing, Yale School of Management, 165 Whitney Avenue, New Haven, CT 06511, USA. Address all correspondence to Guy Voichkek. The first and second authors contributed equally to this research. The authors thank Minju Han, Sonia Kim, Eric Park, Aaron Resnick, Jennifer Savary, Jennifer Sun, and Alisa Wu for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article. Supplementary materials are included in the web appendix accompanying the online version of this article.

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switch to the more nutritious meal kit than the person who did not set a goal. Setting goals may thus hurt performance by decreasing adoption of the most effective means.

Supporting our proposed mechanism, we show that the perceived effectiveness of the initial means, relative to the alternative, partially mediates the effect of setting a goal on the decision to switch means. We also explore boundary conditions. The effect only occurs after people make initial progress and if the goal is numeric and therefore provides a reference point. Finally, we identify a remedy: setting a goal does not decrease switching if people are prompted to consider the advantages of both the initial and alternative means.

The current research contributes to three streams of literature: inertia, goal pursuit, and opportunity cost consideration. Research on inertia finds that consumers often fail to switch course even when doing so would have been beneficial (Lieberman, Amir, and Carmon 2023; Suri et al. 2013; Samuelson and Zeckhauser 1988), but past research has not explored whether setting a goal would help consumers overcome inertia or exacerbate it. Past work has also found that setting a goal leads people to seek the most effective means for pursuing the goal (Bagozzi and Dholakia 1999; Laran, Janiszewski, and Salerno 2016), which suggests that setting a goal may reduce inertia in cases in which alternative means are more effective for goal pursuit. However, we build on work on perceptions of goal progress, which finds that explicit goals can provide a reference point for monitoring progress (Carver and Scheier 1998; Heath et al. 1999), and make the opposite prediction: setting an explicit goal can exacerbate inertia. Thus, although most work on setting goals has explored how goals can improve performance, we identify a novel way in which setting goals can backfire. We further contribute to the literature on goal pursuit by showing that setting a goal can increase the perceived relative effectiveness of the means used to make progress toward it. Finally, we contribute to the literature on opportunity cost consideration, which explored when consumers neglect outside options while making purchase decisions (Frederick et al. 2009; Friedman, Savary, and Dhar 2018; Spiller 2011). We show that setting a goal decreases the uptake of outside opportunities and considerations of their advantages.

From a practical standpoint, our work highlights a potential downside of setting goals. Consumers often set goals to help themselves save more money, exercise more frequently, or work more productively. We find that setting goals may hinder performance by decreasing the likelihood that the consumer will switch to superior alternatives. For instance, we find that investors who make money using one portfolio are less likely to switch when an alternative investment opportunity comes along if they first set an earnings goal. For practitioners, our findings suggest that encouraging consumers to set an explicit goal before

beginning to use a service may decrease switching to competitors, even when the goal is not tied to their specific service.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. A review of prior research leads to the prediction that if consumers use an initial means to pursue an explicit goal, they perceive the initial means to be more effective relative to alternative means, which decreases switching. Thirteen studies and four supplemental studies test this prediction and its implications. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of our findings and suggestions for future research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Goals are desired endpoints that motivate consumers to prefer objects and behaviors that facilitate goal attainment (*goal-consistent means*) and avoid those that do not (*goal-inconsistent means*; Fishbach and Ferguson 2007; Van Osselaer and Janiszewski 2012). Prior research in this area has primarily focused on how setting a goal affects the evaluation of goal-consistent means relative to goal-inconsistent means (Fishbach and Dhar 2005). The current research instead investigates preferences among multiple goal-consistent means.

Consumer goals can typically be pursued using multiple means (the goal's *equifinality configuration*; Etkin and Ratner 2012; Kruglanski et al. 2002). Past work has examined how factors like the number of available goal-consistent means and the perceived variety among them affect both evaluations of individual means and commitment to the goal (Etkin and Ratner 2012; Kruglanski, Pierro, and Sheveland 2011). For example, as more goal-consistent means become available, consumers perceive each means to be less effective for pursuing the goal, but their commitment to the goal strengthens (Kruglanski et al. 2011; Zhang, Fishbach, and Kruglanski 2007). However, little work has explored how setting an explicit goal affects the likelihood of staying with one goal-consistent means versus switching to another goal-consistent means.

People are generally reluctant to switch courses of action, a tendency called *inertia*, the *status quo bias*, or *entrenchment* (Lieberman et al. 2023; Suri et al. 2013; Samuelson and Zeckhauser 1988). For instance, people are more likely to work on a tedious task instead of a more appealing one if they already began working on the tedious task (Lieberman et al. 2023). This aversion to change is reinforced by various psychological barriers, including increased accessibility of information related to the current course of action (Lieberman et al. 2023), loss aversion (Anderson, 2003; Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1991), and greater anticipated regret associated with decisions that change the status quo than decisions that maintain it (Inman and Zeelenberg 2002; Ritov and Baron 1992). One of the mechanisms that contributes to inertia is

reinforcement learning: repeat actions that had positive consequences and not actions that had negative consequences (Sutton and Barto 1998; Worthy, Hawthorne, and Ross Otto 2013).

An open question is whether setting a goal would exacerbate or diminish inertia and reinforcement learning. In situations in which alternative means would be more effective for goal attainment, one might hypothesize that goals would help overcome inertia. In general, having a goal guides people toward the means they consider most effective for pursuing the goal (Bagozzi and Dholakia 1999; Brendl, Markman, and Messner 2003; Shah and Kruglanski 2002). For instance, consumers with (vs. without) a health-related goal are more likely to choose the healthiest food option available (Laran et al. 2016).

However, we propose that setting a goal not only motivates consumers to seek the most effective means, but doing so can also alter beliefs about their effectiveness. Extending work showing that perceptions of means are malleable (Bélanger et al. 2015; Fishbach, Shah, and Kruglanski 2004), we predict that setting an explicit goal increases the perceived effectiveness of the means consumers use to pursue it, relative to alternative means. As a result, setting a goal can exacerbate inertia, leading people to stick with an initial means even when alternatives may better serve the goal.

Our prediction builds on research examining how explicit goals influence consumers' evaluations of means. When consumers set a numeric goal (e.g., "burn N calories" or "earn N dollars"), it can become a reference point they use to assess the effectiveness of their actions (Bonezzi, Brendl, and De Angelis 2011; Carver and Scheier 1998; Heath et al. 1999). According to the model of action phases in goal pursuit, when consumers pause pursuit, they evaluate whether their actions so far have led to progress (Achtziger and Gollwitzer 2010); if they have, people tend to stay on their current path (Gollwitzer 1990). We thus propose that when consumers use a means to pursue an explicit goal (rather than without a goal in mind), they are more likely to consider that the *initial* means, unlike the alternative means, have helped advance their goal (Hsee and Zhang 2010). This could make the initial means seem more effective relative to alternatives. Setting a goal can therefore increase reliance on a reinforcement learning strategy whereby people continue with means that have contributed to goal progress.

Our prediction that setting a goal increases the perceived relative effectiveness of means used to pursue it aligns with research on means-ends fusion. Achieving a goal using a particular means strengthens the mental association between the two, making the means seem more effective (Kruglanski et al., 2018). Relatedly, research on implementation intentions shows that committing to a specific plan of action reduces the likelihood of engaging in unplanned actions, even if they are goal consistent (Masicampo and Baumeister

2012; Parks-Stamm, Gollwitzer, and Oettingen 2007). For example, committing to specific money-saving behaviors can reduce the likelihood that people with a savings goal pursue additional out-of-plan money-saving opportunities (Bayuk, Janiszewski, and LeBoeuf 2010). However, studies exploring implementation intentions manipulate whether people who pursue a goal also commit to a specific *means*; we instead examine whether people who use a given means also commit to a *goal*. Thus, we explore the effect of committing to an outcome (e.g., earn \$X) rather than committing to a means (e.g., invest in portfolio Y).

Our main proposition is that consumers are less likely to switch to an alternative means if they set an explicit goal (vs. did not set an explicit goal) before making progress with the initial means. This occurs because the initial means feels more effective relative to alternatives when people use it (but not the alternative means) to progress toward an explicit goal, compared to when people make the same progress without first setting a goal. In support of our theoretical account that setting an explicit goal provides a reference point for monitoring initial progress, we show that setting a goal only affects preference among means after people make initial progress (as opposed to merely choosing among means) and if the goal is numeric (as opposed to a non-numeric goal, such as "do your best"). Furthermore, we show that perceptions of effectiveness of the initial means relative to the alternative means partially mediate the effect of setting an explicit goal on switching. We use different approaches to measure perceived effectiveness, including Likert scales and open-ended responses. Finally, we identify a remedy: because setting a goal shifts attention toward advantages of the initial means and away from advantages of the alternative means, setting a goal does not affect switching if people are prompted to consider the advantages of *both* means.

In sum, we hypothesize the following:

H1: Setting an explicit goal (vs. not setting an explicit goal) and making progress using an initial means decreases switching to alternative means.

H2: The perceived effectiveness of the initial means relative to the alternative means mediates the effect of setting an explicit goal on the decision to switch means.

H3a: The effect of setting an explicit goal on preference for alternative means is attenuated when people have not yet made progress using the initial means.

H3b: The effect of setting an explicit goal on the decision to switch means is attenuated for non-numeric goals (e.g., "do your best").

H4: Prompting people to consider the advantages of both the initial and alternative means attenuates the effect of setting an explicit goal on the decision to switch means.

We test these hypotheses in 13 studies and four supplemental studies using incentive-compatible and

hypothetical designs across commonly held consumer goals, such as eating healthy and earning money. Studies 1A–C show that setting an explicit goal decreases the likelihood of switching to alternative means and test robustness to potential alternative accounts. Studies 2A–C test the generalizability of the effect across various consumer goals. Studies 3A–C show that the effect of setting an explicit goal on switching is partially mediated by the perceived effectiveness of the initial means relative to alternative means. Study 4 provides further support for the impact of goals on perceived relative effectiveness by analyzing open-ended responses, as well as examines what people consider when evaluating effectiveness. Studies 5A and B identify boundary conditions consistent with our proposed mechanism: preference among means is only affected after consumers make initial progress and if the goal is numeric (i.e., “earn at least \$N” rather than “earn as much as you can”). Study 6 introduces a remedy: setting a goal does not affect switching if people are prompted to consider the advantages of both means.

Sample sizes were determined prior to data collection.¹ We report all manipulations, measures, and preregistered analyses and do not exclude any participant who completed a study and passed all attention checks. Participants were prevented from participating in more than one study on the same recruitment platform. Full study materials are in the web appendix, and data and analysis code are posted on the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/qzgs5/overview?view_only=d7b68092179e41b1878724d9bcd9b0ff).

STUDY 1A: SETTING AN EARNINGS GOAL DECREASES SWITCHING TO A BETTER-PAYING ALTERNATIVE

The first study tests whether people are less likely to switch from an initial means of pursuit to an alternative means if they set an explicit goal (hypothesis 1). Prior to working on paid tasks, some participants were instructed to set an earnings goal and some were not. After attempting an initial task, they had the option to switch to an easier, higher-paying task. We predicted that participants who set an earnings goal would be less likely to switch to the alternative task than participants who did not set an explicit goal. Study 1A was preregistered (<http://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=cg79m9>).

Method

We opened the study to 400 participants on TurkPrime, and 399 passed all screeners and completed the study² (52% female and 46% male, mean age 37 years).

1 Slight deviations from recruitment targets occurred because Prolific and TurkPrime often allow multiple participants to enter the study simultaneously as the quota is being reached.

2 Given data quality issues on Amazon MTurk (Chmielewski and Kucker 2020), we included screeners in all studies conducted on the

Participants were assigned to one of two conditions: goal versus no goal. All participants read the following:

In this study, you will be asked to complete tasks for money. There are two potential tasks you may have the opportunity to do.

Descriptions of each task appeared with separate clicks.

The first type of task is called Anagrams. Anagrams are puzzles in which letters can be rearranged to form a word. For example, with the letters T H I G R B, you could create the anagram "BRIGHT." Please note that each anagram requires you to use all the letters. For instance, in the example above (T H I G R B), the response "RIGHT" would NOT be correct. For each correctly solved anagram, you will receive a payment of \$0.02.

The second type of task is called Letter Counting. In the letter counting task, you will be presented with pairs of words. For each pair, you will need to identify the word with fewer letters. For each correctly solved word pair, you will receive a payment of \$0.03.

Next, participants read that they would begin working on a series of anagrams for two minutes. In this and all subsequent studies using the anagram/letter-counting paradigm, anagrams always served as the initial task and letter counting was the alternative to test whether setting a goal decreases switching even when alternative means are more effective.³ Prior to working on anagram tasks, participants in the goal condition read the following:

On average, people have been able to earn about 20 cents in this study. Please commit to a goal for how much money you aim to earn. This goal should be challenging, but realistic.

Participants set their goal in a free response box. The text *Remember, you committed to earn [participant's goal] cents* remained on each of the following pages. Participants in the no-goal condition did not set a goal or see a reminder.

Next, all participants attempted to solve the anagram EFIHT and then responded to our primary dependent variable: “At this point, you may spend the remaining time solving anagrams. Alternatively, you may switch to Letter Counting. If you choose to switch, you will spend the remaining time working on word pairs, and earn \$0.03 for every correct solution.” Participants had two minutes to work on their chosen task and were paid according to their performance.

Results and Discussion

Setting an Earnings Goal Decreased Switching. Setting a goal made participants less likely to switch to the alternative means ($P_{\text{goal}} = 33\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 49\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 10.57$,

platform and excluded participants who failed any of them before analyzing the data.

3 Results from this and subsequent studies confirm that letter counting is indeed a more effective way to earn money. More importantly, a pretest confirmed that people think so (web appendix S1).

$p = .001$). Participants who chose to switch earned more overall (collapsing across goal conditions, $M_{\text{switched}} = \$0.47$, $SD = 0.15$ vs. $M_{\text{remained}} = \$0.19$, $SD = 0.12$; $t(397) = 20.37$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.07$). As a result, participants who set an earnings goal earned less than those who did not ($M_{\text{goal}} = \$0.29$, $SD = 0.19$ vs. $M_{\text{no-goal}} = \$0.32$, $SD = 0.18$; $t(397) = 2.01$, $p = .045$, $d = 0.20$).⁴

In study 1A, participants were less likely to switch from an initial means if they set a goal before starting to use it, even though the alternative means would be more effective for pursuing that goal. Whereas we propose that this happened because means *felt* more effective relative to alternatives, a competing explanation is that setting a goal could have improved performance with the initial means, increasing its *actual* effectiveness. However, we found the opposite: participants who set a goal were *less* likely to solve the initial anagram ($P_{\text{goal}} = 74\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 83\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 4.32$, $p = .038$). Setting a goal did not influence the likelihood of solving the initial anagrams in any of our other studies ([web appendix A1](#)), suggesting that the effect is not driven by improved performance with the initial means.

Finally, because we propose that making progress toward a goal reduces switching, setting a goal should not affect switching among participants who failed the initial anagram. However, because nearly all participants solved the initial anagram, we did not have sufficient power to test this.⁵ Notably, analysis using the full sample is conservative to our effect because it includes participants who did not make progress using the initial means.

STUDY 1B: SETTING A GOAL DECREASES SWITCHING BOTH BEFORE AND AFTER PARTICIPANTS KNOW WHICH MEANS THEY WOULD USE FIRST

One potential explanation for the results in study 1A is that setting a goal before using an initial means decreased switching because participants, consciously or subconsciously, set the goal in relation to the initial task (e.g., when setting a goal

to earn a specific sum of money, they may have interpreted it as a goal to solve a specific number of anagrams). If the effect of setting a goal on switching is driven by participants setting a goal with the initial means in mind, the effect should weaken if participants set the goal without yet knowing the initial means. Study 1B tests this by having participants set a goal either before or after learning that anagrams would be the initial task. We predict that setting a goal would decrease switching in both cases because the perceived effectiveness of the means depends on whether a goal is set before *making progress* not on whether it is set before *learning the initial means*.

Method

We opened the study to 600 participants on TurkPrime, and 611 participants passed all screeners and completed the study (49% female and 51% male, mean age 37 years). We assigned participants to one of three conditions: goal post-reveal versus goal pre-reveal versus no goal. For participants in the *goal-post-reveal* and the *no-goal* conditions, the study was identical to study 1A. However, participants in the *goal-pre-reveal* condition set an earnings goal *before* learning that the initial task would be anagrams. Unlike in study 1A, participants did not continue working on their chosen task after the switching decision.

Results and Discussion

Setting a Goal Decreased Switching Regardless of Whether It Was Set Before or After the Initial Means Were Revealed. Participants who set a goal were less likely to switch to the easier, higher-paying task ($P_{\text{goal}} = 45\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 57\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 7.86$, $p = .005$), both when the goal was set before ($P_{\text{pre-reveal}} = 44\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 6.41$, $p = .011$) and after the initial means were revealed ($P_{\text{post-reveal}} = 45\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 5.38$, $p = .020$). Switching rates did not differ between the goal conditions ($\chi^2(1) = 0.05$, $p = .826$), suggesting that participants did not substitute a goal to earn a certain amount of money with a goal to complete a certain number of tasks.

STUDY 1C: THE EFFECT OF SETTING A GOAL ON SWITCHING CANNOT BE FULLY EXPLAINED BY UNCERTAINTY AVERSION

A potential explanation for our findings is that participants with a goal may avoid switching means because they are less certain that they can achieve the goal with unfamiliar means. To test this, half of the participants in study 1C first familiarized themselves with both means.

⁴ Switching to the letter counting task directionally increased earnings across studies in which participants completed their chosen task ([web appendix](#)). Notably, our theory does not make strong predictions about the effect of setting a goal on ultimate performance (e.g., total earnings). This is because performance depends not only on which means people choose but also on factors beyond the scope of our psychological account—such as luck, skill, and the specific problems to solve, which participants often only learn about after switching. Importantly, in the absence of a goal, most people *believe* the alternative task would be more effective (participants explicitly express this belief in studies 3A and B and [web appendix S1](#)), yet setting a goal reduces switching to it.

⁵ In study 1B, 144 participants failed to solve the first anagram, providing some power to analyze switching decisions among them. Among those participants, we found no effect of setting a goal on the decision to switch ([web appendix A2](#)).

Method

We opened study 1C to 800 participants on Prolific, and 801 completed it (78% female and 20% male, mean age 24 years). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (goal vs. no-goal) $\times$ 2 (trial vs. no-trial) design. The procedure followed that of study 1A, but before starting to work on anagrams, participants in the *trial* conditions attempted one anagram (UHTMO) and one letter-counting task (buzzwords vs. highjacked). Participants did not continue working on their chosen task after the switching decision.

Results and Discussion

Setting a Goal Decreased Switching Regardless of Familiarity With Both Tasks. Setting a goal reduced switching ($P_{\text{goal}} = 32\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 43\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 12.09$, $p < .001$). This occurred in both the *trial* ($P_{\text{goal}} = 36\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 46\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 4.05$, $p = .044$) and *no-trial* conditions ($P_{\text{goal}} = 28\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 41\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 7.65$, $p = .006$). A logistic regression with the decision to switch as the dependent variable and *goal*, *trial*, and their interaction as independent variables did not find a significant interaction ($b = 0.18$, standard error [SE] = 0.30, $p = .554$), indicating that the decision to switch was not moderated by familiarity with the alternative task.⁶

Study 1C shows that the effect of setting a goal on switching persists when people are familiar with both means, suggesting that the effect is not fully driven by uncertainty about the alternative (study 2C will provide additional support for this claim). We address the potential role of uncertainty in the relationship between setting goals and switching decisions in the General Discussion.

STUDIES 2A–C: GENERALIZING TO OTHER CONSUMER GOAL DOMAINS

Studies 1A–C provided evidence that setting a goal to earn an amount of money decreases the likelihood that people switch to an alternative, better-paying means of earning money. The effect cannot be fully explained by goals improving performance with the initial means, setting a goal specifically tied to the initial means, or increasing aversion to unfamiliar means. The next set of studies tests our main effect in other consumer goal contexts.

⁶ Although not the primary focus of this study, we also examined whether prior experience with the alternative means influenced the likelihood of switching to it. Overall, participants were more likely to switch if they already tried the alternative task ($P_{\text{trial}} = 41\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-trial}} = 34\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 4.07$, $p = .044$), suggesting that people are more likely to switch to alternative means when they are more familiar with them.

STUDY 2A: SETTING A HEALTH GOAL REDUCES SWITCHING TO A HEALTHIER ALTERNATIVE

Study 2A tested whether participants who used a meal service would be less likely to switch to a healthier meal service if they first set a health-related goal. Study 2A was preregistered (<https://aspredicted.org/xfx6-4q4d.pdf>).

Method

We opened the study to 400 participants on Prolific, using the recruitment prompt, “Calling all dieters and people who try to eat healthy! Quick scenario study about food,” and 400 participants (59% female and 38% male, mean age 42 years) completed the study. Participants were assigned to one of two conditions: goal versus no goal. All participants read the following:

Suppose you decided to try a new meal plan in order to eat healthier and control your caloric intake. It delivers each meal of the day: breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Participants assigned to set a goal also read the following:

When signing up for the meal plan, you are encouraged to set a daily calorie intake target between 1,400 and 3,000 calories. Please set a goal for your daily calorie intake between 1,400 and 3,000.

Those participants set a goal using a free-response box and on subsequent pages saw the following:

Remember, you set a goal to consume [participants’ chosen value] calories per day.

Then, all participants read the following:

Suppose you decide to try Meal Plan A for today. For each meal of the day, you get to choose from a couple of options, and the meal gets delivered fresh. Please advance the page to choose your breakfast.

Participants then chose between two options for their breakfast: *overnight oats with fruit and a scone* (285 calories) and a *bean, egg, cheese and avocado breakfast burrito* (320 calories). On the next page, participants read that they were delivered their choice and had now consumed [285 or 320] calories with Meal Plan A. Finally, participants read the following:

Rather than order your lunch and dinner from Meal Plan A, you may try Meal Plan B instead. Meal Plan B tends to provide slightly more nutritious, lower calorie meals, and is a little more highly rated. What do you choose? [Keep Meal Plan A for the rest of today or Switch to Meal Plan B for the rest of the day.]

Results and Discussion

Setting a Health Goal Decreased Switching to a Healthier Meal Plan. Participants who set a calorie goal were less likely to switch to the alternative meal plan ($P_{\text{goal}} = 65\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 80\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 11.16$, $p < .001$). The effect remained significant when controlling for participants' breakfast choice ($B = -0.70$, $SE = 0.23$, $p = .003$).

STUDY 2B: SETTING AN EARNINGS GOAL REDUCES SWITCHING TO AN ALTERNATIVE INVESTMENT FUND

Study 2B tests whether our main finding generalizes in four ways. First, study 2B used a different consumer choice scenario: making investment decisions. Second, all participants chose the initial means themselves rather than the experimenters assigning it. Third, participants had several alternative means available rather than just one. Fourth, the alternative means were not necessarily superior. Although our focus is on cases in which the alternative would be more effective, our theory applies regardless of the alternatives' effectiveness.

As in study 1A, the design was incentive compatible: all participants invested real money and received money from their investments at the end of the survey. Participants made an initial investment in a fund of their choice, then chose whether to continue investing in the same fund or switch to one of three alternative funds. We predicted that participants who set an earnings goal would be less likely to switch. Study 2B was preregistered (https://aspredicted.org/NQM_XSW).

Method

We opened study 2B to 400 participants on Prolific, and 399 participants (52% female and 47% male, mean age 31 years) completed the study. Participants were assigned to one of two conditions: goal versus no goal. All participants read the following:

This study includes an investment game in which you'll be given 50 cents to invest. The game consists of 4 rounds, representing 4 investment years. Typically, a good annual return on investment is around 10%. For perspective, if you achieve a consistent 10% return each year, your 50 cents would grow to approximately 70 cents over four years. This means you would earn a profit of about 20 cents.

Then, participants in the *goal* condition were asked, "For the next four rounds (representing four investment years), set a personal earnings goal ranging from **10 cents** to **30 cents**." Those participants set a goal using a free-response box and were reminded of it at the top of subsequent pages.

On the next page, all participants made their first investment decision. They read, "You may only invest in one fund at a time (you cannot split your investment between

two funds). Which fund do you prefer to invest 50 cents in?" and chose between funds that invested either 60% or 90% in equities, with information provided about each fund's asset allocation, risk level, region, and number of holdings.

On the following page, participants read, "During the first year, your investment in [chosen fund] earned you a profit of 8 cents." Participants in the goal condition also read, "This gets you closer to your goal of earning [participant's goal] cents over 4 years." All participants read, "For the second investment year, do you prefer to keep your money with [initially chosen fund], or to switch to one of the available alternatives?" This choice had four options (the two initial options plus two additional alternatives): 60%, 70%, 80%, and 90% equity funds. Regardless of what participants chose, we paid them a bonus of \$0.82, because the funds' risk levels were ambiguous.

Results and Discussion

Setting an Earnings Goal Decreased Switching to Alternative Funds. We analyzed the switching decision as both a binary outcome (remained with the initial fund vs. switched) and continuous (similarity between the chosen fund and initial fund).

For the binary analysis, we conducted a logistic regression with the goal condition as the independent variable, switching decision as the dependent variable, and initial fund as a control variable. We found that setting a goal decreased switching ($B = -0.61$, $SE = 0.20$, $p = .003$), which we confirmed with a supplemental chi-square test ($P_{\text{goal}} = 46\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 61\%$; $\chi^2(1) = 8.71$, $p = .003$).

For the continuous analysis, we coded a choice to stay with the initial fund as 0, the most similar alternative fund as 1, the second-most-similar fund as 2, and the least-similar fund as 3 (e.g., if the participant initially chose the 60% fund, the 60% fund would be coded as 0, 70% as 1, 80% as 2, and 90% as 3). We then conducted a regression with the goal condition as the independent variable, switching decision as the dependent variable, and chosen initial fund as a control variable. Consistent with our hypothesis, setting a goal decreased switching ($b = -0.32$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .001$). This was corroborated by a supplemental t-test showing that switching was lower in the *goal* condition ($M_{\text{goal}} = 0.67$, $SD = 0.87$ vs. $M_{\text{no-goal}} = 0.99$, $SD = 0.98$; $t(397) = 3.49$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.35$).⁷

Study 2B found that setting an earnings goal reduces switching from the initial means in an investment context. However, to make the study incentive compatible, we had

⁷ We conducted an additional non-preregistered regression among the 214 participants who switched means. Because initial means are seen as more effective relative to alternatives, we predicted that people who set a goal and still switched means would select means that are similar to the initial means. We found a marginally significant effect ($b = 0.17$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = .097$), providing some support for this notion.

to use investments of small sums (\$0.50) that might not represent the scope of investments people actually make. To address this limitation, we conducted a supplemental study, identical to 2B except that 308 participants (45% female and 52% male, mean age 31 years) invested a hypothetical \$1,000 (web appendix S2). Our findings held: setting a goal reduced switching from the initial fund for both our binary ($B = -0.65$, $SE = 0.25$, $p = .009$) and continuous analyses (in which switching to more dissimilar funds is coded higher on a 0–3 scale; $B = -0.34$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .001$).

STUDY 2C: SETTING AN INVESTMENT-PERIOD GOAL REDUCES SWITCHING TO ANOTHER INVESTMENT PRODUCT

Study 2C expands our investigation to a different type of goal, to invest for a specified period of time, rather than to earn a particular amount of money. Furthermore, in study 2C, initial progress does not provide any additional information about the initial means versus the alternative means; because the goal is to invest for a given number of months rather than to earn a given sum of money, participants are aware that investing in any fund guarantees progress toward the goal. Our theory suggests that a means seems more effective relative to alternatives because it is used to make progress toward a goal, *not* because people have more information about it. We therefore predicted that the effect would persist. Additionally, we assigned the goal for participants rather than letting them set a goal for themselves to test whether our effect generalizes to externally set goals (Latham and Marshall 1982). Study 2C was preregistered (https://aspredicted.org/9MV_X7N).

Method

We opened the study for 400 participants on Prolific, and 402 participants (56% female and 43% male, mean age 33 years) completed the study. Participants were assigned to one of two conditions: goal versus no goal. All participants began the study by indicating their income from a multiple-choice list ranging from *less than \$10,000* to *more than \$150,000*, in \$10,000 increments. This amount determined the size of the investments in subsequent parts of the study. Participants then read the following:

Suppose you decided to invest some of your income using a robo-investor. Robo-investors ask some questions about your financial situation and future goals through an online survey, and then use the data to offer advice and automatically invest for you. The best robo-investors offer easy account setup, robust goal planning, account services, and portfolio management. After doing some market research, you decided to open an account with the robo-advisor “Wealthforward.”

Participants assigned to set a goal also read, “You also decided to make deposits with a robo-investor until you invest for at least 12 months.” To ensure that participants in the goal condition understood their goal, they next responded to a comprehension check: “Which of the following options best represents the goal you set?” with three response options: “make deposits with a robo-investor until I invest for at least 12 months,” “make deposits ONLY with Wealthforward until I invest for at least 12 months,” and “I’m not sure.” At the top of subsequent pages, those participants were reminded, “Keep in mind that you decided to invest for at least 12 months with a robo-advisor.” In this and the following studies, we placed comprehension checks immediately after the manipulation, rather than at the end of the studies, so they would also serve as a reminder that the goal could be accomplished using either means.

On the following page, all participants read, “This is your first month with Wealthforward,” and had to click on, “Invest [0.083% of the lower bound of their income category] with Wealthforward.” (For instance, for a participant with an annual income of \$20,000–\$29,999, the monthly investment was \$16.60.)

These monthly investments were repeated three more times. At the top of the page for each month, participants were reminded how much and for how many months they had already invested with Wealthforward, but participants did not learn how their investment had performed. Finally, all participants read the following:

As you enter your fifth month using Wealthforward, you see an ad for Preferment, a different robo-advisor. Preferment is similar to Wealthforward but has slightly lower fees and it also allows users to access human financial planners for a fee. What would you do? [Stay with Wealthforward or Switch to Preferment]

Results and Discussion

Setting an Investment Goal Decreased Switching to an Alternative Robo-Advisor. Participants who set a goal to invest for at least 12 months were less likely to switch to the alternative robo-advisor ($P_{\text{goal}} = 35\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 56\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 17.87$, $p < .001$). Importantly, this finding held after we removed the 82 participants who failed the comprehension check ($P_{\text{goal}} = 37\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 56\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 11.02$, $p < .001$).⁸

Study 2C demonstrates that our main effect generalizes to externally assigned goals, to a different type of goal (investing for a period of time) and to situations in which

8 In case the comprehension check affected the results, we ran a preregistered replication (https://aspredicted.org/SN9_XNS) without it ($N = 398$, 48% female and 50% male, mean age 29 years) and replicated the results ($P_{\text{goal}} = 39\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 52\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 5.88$, $p = .015$).

progress does not provide more information about the initial means than about the alternatives.

STUDIES 3A–C: THE EFFECT OF SETTING A GOAL ON SWITCHING IS MEDIATED BY THE PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF THE INITIAL MEANS RELATIVE TO THE ALTERNATIVE

The next set of studies builds on studies 1A, 2A, and 2B, using the same designs but adding measures of the perceived effectiveness of the initial and alternative means. In studies 3A–C, we measured perceived effectiveness after the switching decision to test whether the effect of setting a goal on switching is mediated by the perceived effectiveness of the initial means relative to alternative means (hypothesis 2). In study 4, we measured perceived effectiveness without including a switching decision to ensure that effectiveness ratings were not driven by participants trying to be consistent with their prior choices.

STUDY 3A: PERCEIVED RELATIVE EFFECTIVENESS MEDIATES THE EFFECT OF SETTING AN EARNINGS GOAL ON SWITCHING

The design of study 3A closely reflected that of study 1A, with the addition of questions measuring the perceived effectiveness of the initial and alternative means. Study 3A also included a comprehension check to verify that participants understood that they could use either means to meet their goal (i.e., “earn \$N,” *not* “earn \$N by working on anagrams”). Study 3A was preregistered (https://aspredicted.org/5PP_GZ7).

Method

We opened study 3A to 400 participants on Prolific, and 401 participants completed the study (34% female and 65% male, mean age 43 years). Participants were assigned to one of two conditions: goal versus no goal. The study followed the design of study 1A with a few modifications.

First, tasks were described more succinctly (see [web appendix M9](#) for full materials). Second, participants who set a goal also completed a comprehension check to ensure they understood that the goal could be completed using either means. Specifically, they were asked which statement best describes the goal they set, with the following options: “Earn [participant’s set goal] cents,” “work ONLY on Anagram tasks until I earn [participant’s set goal] cents,” “work ONLY on Letter-Counting tasks until I earn [participant’s set goal] cents,” and “I’m not sure.”

Third, we measured participants’ perceived effectiveness of the anagram and letter-counting tasks. On the page following the switching decision, participants were asked, “To what extent did you feel like the anagram task was the best way to make money in this survey?” followed by the same question for the letter-counting task. They responded on scales from “definitely not the best way” (coded as 1) to “definitely the best way” (coded as 9). Participants then worked on their chosen task for two minutes and received a bonus based on their performance.

Results and Discussion

Setting a Payment Goal Reduced Switching to a Higher-Paying Task. Participants who set a goal were less likely to switch to the alternative letter-counting task ($P_{\text{goal}} = 46\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 62\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 11.34$, $p < .001$). Thirty-two participants failed the attention check. Removing them from analysis does not qualitatively change the results ([web appendix A3](#)).

Setting a Goal Increased the Perceived Effectiveness of the Initial Means Relative to the Alternative. Setting a goal increased the perceived relative effectiveness of the anagrams task, calculated by subtracting each participant’s perceived effectiveness rating of letter-counting from that of anagrams ($M_{\text{goal}} = -1.46$, $SD = 3.78$ vs. $M_{\text{no-goal}} = -2.50$; $SD = 3.79$; $t(399) = 2.78$, $p = .006$, $d = 0.28$).

Although our theory does not offer clear predictions about how setting a goal influences the perceived absolute effectiveness of either means, we analyzed the effectiveness ratings of each task individually as well. Compared with participants who did not set a goal, participants who set a goal viewed solving anagrams as a more effective way to earn money ($M_{\text{goal}} = 4.60$, $SD = 2.23$ vs. $M_{\text{no-goal}} = 4.12$, $SD = 2.33$; $t(399) = 2.13$, $p = .034$, $d = 0.21$) and letter counting a less effective way to earn money ($M_{\text{goal}} = 6.05$, $SD = 1.98$ vs. $M_{\text{no-goal}} = 6.62$, $SD = 1.86$; $t(399) = 2.93$, $p = .004$, $d = 0.29$).

Perceived Relative Effectiveness Partially Mediated the Effect of Setting a Goal on the Likelihood of Switching. We ran a mediation analysis with 10,000 bootstrapped samples, goal condition as the independent variable, switching decision as the dependent variable, and perceived relative effectiveness as the mediator and found a significant indirect effect ($b = -0.36$, $SE = 0.14$, 95% CI $[-0.65, -0.10]$, $p = .005$). Setting a goal increased the perceived effectiveness of the initial means relative to the alternative ($b = 1.05$, $SE = 0.38$, $p = .006$), which was associated with decreased switching ($b = -0.34$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$). The remaining direct effect remained significant ($b = -0.53$, $SE = 0.24$, $p = .024$). We conducted similar analyses using the individual effectiveness measures for both anagrams and letter counting as mediators, and both paths were significant (anagrams: $b = -0.20$, $SE = 0.10$,

95% CI $[-0.41, -0.02]$, $p = .034$; letter counting: $b = -0.37$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI $[-0.64, -0.11]$; see [web appendix A3](#) for the full mediation analyses).

Study 3A found that setting a goal increases the perceived effectiveness of the initial means relative to the alternative means, which partially mediates the effect of setting a goal on switching to alternative means.

STUDY 3B: PERCEIVED RELATIVE EFFECTIVENESS MEDIATES THE EFFECT OF SETTING A GOAL ON THE LIKELIHOOD OF SWITCHING MEAL SERVICES

Study 3B again tested whether the perceived relative effectiveness of the means mediates the effect of setting a goal on the likelihood of switching means, this time in the context of healthy eating. The design was identical to study 2A, with the addition of perceived effectiveness measures.

Method

We opened the study to 200 participants on Prolific, and 199 participants completed the study (38% female and 61% male, mean age 40 years). After indicating which meal service they would use for the rest of the day, participants responded to two follow-up questions, both in the following format: "In this scenario, how effective do you think Meal Plan [A/B] is for helping you control your caloric intake?" They responded on scales from "not at all effective" (coded as 1) to "very effective" (coded as 9).

Results and Discussion

Setting a Health Goal Decreased Switching to a Healthier Meal Plan. Compared with participants who did not set a goal, participants who set a goal were less likely to switch to the alternative meal plan ($P_{\text{goal}} = 61\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 77\%$; $\chi^2(1) = 5.99$, $p = .014$).

Setting a Goal Increased the Perceived Effectiveness of the Initial Means Relative to the Alternative. Setting a goal increased the perceived relative effectiveness of the initial means, calculated by subtracting each participant's perceived effectiveness of Meal Plan B from that of Meal Plan A ($M_{\text{goal}} = -0.29$, $SD = 1.95$ vs. $M_{\text{no-goal}} = -0.83$, $SD = 1.72$; $t(197) = 2.10$, $p = .037$, $d = 0.30$).

Although our theory does not offer clear predictions about how setting a goal influences the perceived absolute effectiveness of either means, we analyzed the effectiveness ratings of each task individually as well. Compared with participants who did not set a goal, participants who set a goal perceived the alternative meal plan to be directionally less effective for controlling caloric intake ($M_{\text{goal}} = 6.70$, $SD = 1.48$ vs. $M_{\text{no-goal}} = 7.05$; $SD = 1.57$; $t(197) = 1.60$, $p = .112$, $d = 0.23$) and the initial meal plan

to be a directionally more effective ($M_{\text{goal}} = 6.42$, $SD = 1.62$ vs. $M_{\text{no-goal}} = 6.22$, $SD = 1.60$; $t(197) = 0.88$, $p = .380$, $d = 0.12$). Although neither effect was significant, the effect was larger for the alternative means, consistent with study 3A.

Perceived Relative Effectiveness Mediated the Effect of Setting a Goal on the Likelihood of Switching. We tested whether the effect of setting a goal on perceived relative effectiveness of the initial means mediates the effect on switching using 10,000 bootstrapped samples, with goal condition as the independent variable, the switching decision as the dependent variable, and perceived relative effectiveness as the mediator. The effect of setting a goal on switching was mediated by the perceived relative effectiveness of the initial meal plan ($b = -0.20$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI $[-0.50, -0.01]$, $p = .036$). Setting a goal increased the perceived effectiveness of the initial means relative to the alternative means ($b = 0.55$, $SE = 0.26$, $p = .037$), which in turn was associated with decreased switching ($b = -0.36$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .001$). The remaining direct effect decreased to marginal significance ($b = -0.61$, $SE = 0.33$, $p = .063$).

STUDY 3C: PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS MEDIATES THE EFFECT OF SETTING AN INVESTMENT GOAL ON SWITCHING

Study 3C tested whether the perceived effectiveness of the means mediates the effect of setting a goal on switching in the context of investment decisions. The design was identical to study 2B, with the addition of a perceived effectiveness measure. Because there were three potential alternative means in study 3C, we only asked about the effectiveness of the initial means.

Method

We opened study 3C to 300 participants on Prolific, and 298 participants completed the study (47% female and 52% male, mean age 31 years). Participants were assigned to one of two conditions: goal versus no goal. After indicating whether to stay with the initial fund or switch to one of the alternatives, participants were asked, "In terms of generating financial returns, how would you rate the performance of the fund you invested in during the first year ([participant's chosen initial fund])?" They then responded on a scale from "not effective at all" (coded as 0) to "extremely effective" (coded as 4).

Results and Discussion

Setting an Earnings Goal Made the Initial Fund Feel More Profitable and Decreased Switching to Alternatives.

We conducted a logistic regression with the goal condition as the independent variable, the binary switching decision

as the dependent variable, and choice of initial fund as a control variable. Setting a goal significantly decreased switching ($b = -0.74$, $SE = 0.25$, $p = .003$). This was corroborated by a chi-square test ($P_{\text{goal}} = 41\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 58\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 8.41$, $p = .004$). Furthermore, setting an earnings goal increased the perceived effectiveness of the initial fund ($M_{\text{goal}} = 2.41$, $SD = 0.77$ vs. $M_{\text{no-goal}} = 2.05$, $SD = 0.84$; $t(296) = 3.80$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.44$).

Perceived Effectiveness Partially Mediated the Effect of Setting a Goal on the Likelihood of Switching. We next tested whether the effect of setting a goal on perceived effectiveness of the initial means mediates the effect on switching using 10,000 bootstrapped samples, with goal condition as the independent variable, the binary switching decision as the dependent variable, and perceived relative effectiveness as the mediator.⁹ We found significant mediation ($b = -0.11$, 95% CI $[-0.25, -0.01]$, $p = .036$). Setting a goal increased the perceived effectiveness of the initial fund ($b = 0.36$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .001$), which was associated with reduced switching ($b = -0.31$, $SE = 0.15$, $p = .041$). The remaining direct effect remained significant ($b = -0.58$, $SE = 0.24$, $p = .016$).

In studies 3A–C, setting goals in the domains of work, health, and investments increased the perceived effectiveness of the initial means relative to the alternative. This shift in perceived effectiveness partially mediated the effect of setting a goal on the likelihood of switching to alternative means.

STUDY 4: SETTING A GOAL INCREASES THE PERCEIVED RELATIVE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE INITIAL MEANS (OPEN-ENDED)

In study 4, we analyzed participants' open-ended explanations of which means they thought would be more effective. This offered an additional measure of perceived effectiveness while also providing insight into whether setting an explicit goal influences what people consider when evaluating effectiveness. Furthermore, in studies 3A–C, the mechanism measures appeared after participants made the switching decision. This risked spillover effects, as participants may have adjusted their effectiveness ratings to justify their choice. To address this concern, in study 4, participants assessed effectiveness without making a switching decision.

We predicted that, consistent with studies 3A–C, setting a goal would make people more likely to indicate that the initial means is more effective and less likely to indicate that the alternative is more effective. Moreover, because our

theory posits that setting a goal draws focus toward how the initial means advanced the goal and away from how the alternative could advance the goal, we expected that participants who set a goal would be more likely to consider the advantages of the initial means and less likely to consider advantages related to the alternative means. Study 4 was preregistered (<https://aspredicted.org/j2sk-brfh.pdf>).

Method

We opened study 4 to 400 participants on Prolific, and 399 participants completed the study (53% female and 46% male, mean age 36 years). Participants were assigned to one of two conditions: goal versus no goal. The design was similar to study 3A (see [web appendix M12](#) for full materials). Participants solved one anagram [HCTPI], and on the following page, responded to the following question: "Before proceeding, please briefly write your thoughts about which task or tasks you think will be most effective for earning money during the study [in order to achieve the goal you set]. Please briefly explain your reasoning." Participants were not asked to make a choice and did not continue working on tasks.

Results and Discussion

Two independent coders, blind to condition and hypotheses, determined whether each participant judged the initial or alternative task as more effective and categorized their reasoning.¹⁰ Coders agreed in 93% of cases, and disagreements were resolved by a researcher, blind to condition.

Setting a Goal Increased the Perceived Relative Effectiveness of the Initial Means. Compared with participants in the no-goal condition, participants in the goal condition were more likely to indicate that the initial task was most effective ($P_{\text{goal}} = 34\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 24\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 4.55$, $p = .033$) and less likely to indicate that the alternative task was most effective ($P_{\text{goal}} = 52\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 66\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 7.77$, $p = .005$). This suggests that the findings from our previous studies were not merely due to participants justifying their choices as the pattern persisted when participants had not made a switching decision.

Setting a Goal Shifted Considerations Toward Advantages of the Initial Means and Away From Advantages of the Alternative Means. Coders also indicated whether each explanation mentioned the following: (a) pay rate, (b) speed or ease of completion,¹¹ (c) personal skill, or (d)

9 The findings are consistent regardless of whether we treat the switching decision as binary or continuous and whether we control for the initial fund or not (see [web appendix A4](#) for details).

10 We preregistered that ChatGPT would run this analysis. However, ChatGPT provided inconsistent output for the same responses, so we instead relied on human coders. We followed ChatGPT's suggestions for the buckets to use to categorize the free responses.

11 Speed and ease were originally coded as separate buckets, but due to conceptual overlap, we collapsed them after coding. The bigger difference between conditions was on ease, rather than speed, of completion.

TABLE 1

FREE RESPONSE CODING BY CONDITION (STUDY 4)

Effective task	Goal	No goal	
Letter counting	52%	66%	
Anagrams	34%	24%	
Effectiveness reasons	Goal	No goal	Regression predicting task indicated as most effective ^a <i>b</i> (SE)
Pay rate	19%	20%	2.44 (0.62)***
Speed/ease	46%	62%	1.45 (0.28)***
Personal skill	22%	12%	-1.14 (0.34)***
Personal preference	4%	6%	-2.50 (0.79)**

^aPositive coefficients indicate letter counting, and negative coefficients indicate anagrams.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

NOTE.—SE, standard error.

personal preference. Additionally, we ran a regression with whether people mentioned each reason as separate independent variables (0 = no, 1 = yes) and which task they stated would be more effective as the dependent variable (0 = anagram, 1 = letter counting) to categorize which considerations were associated with each task; participants who indicated that neither/both tasks were most effective were excluded from the regression. See Table 1 for comparisons of considerations by condition and the regression results.

A similar number of people across conditions (and notably, fewer than 20% in both) listed the difference in pay rate ($\chi^2(1) = 0.01, p = .918$), and very few mentioned personal preferences. However, consistent with our theory, significantly fewer people in the goal condition mentioned advantages of the alternative letter-counting task, namely speed and ease ($\chi^2(1) = 9.36, p = .002$). Mentions of speed and ease significantly predicted assessing letter counting as more effective ($b = 1.45, SE = 0.28, p < .001$). This suggests that people who set a goal are less likely to consider reasons why the alternative may be helpful for goal pursuit, compared with people who did not set a goal. Instead, people in the goal condition mentioned personal skill more often ($\chi^2(1) = 7.30, p = .007$); mentions of skill were predictive of assessing anagrams as the more effective task ($b = -1.14, SE = 0.34, p < .001$).

These results suggest that setting a goal leads people to focus less on what makes the alternative means effective (being easy and fast) and instead focus more on considerations related to the initial means, such as their personal skill. This shift in considerations may help explain why setting a goal and making progress influences perceptions of the relative effectiveness of the means.

A focus on personal skill is also consistent with work on agency in goal pursuit, which finds that people are more likely to attribute actions that advance explicit goals (vs. the

same actions taken without a goal in mind) to their own ability rather than to circumstance or chance (Aarts, Custers, and Marien 2009). Importantly, people who set a goal were less likely to consider the advantages of the alternative means, which is consistent with our theoretical account that making progress toward a goal using the initial means (and not using the alternative means) shifts focus away from alternatives (Van Der Weiden, Ruys, and Aarts 2013).

STUDIES 5A AND B: BOUNDARY CONDITIONS

We propose that setting an explicit goal decreases the likelihood of switching to alternative means because initial means feel more effective relative to alternatives when they are used to progress toward explicit goals. This occurs because goals provide a reference point which people can use to track their progress (Heath et al. 1999; Carver and Scheier 1998). We therefore predict that the effect of setting a goal on the decision to switch means should attenuate when people have not yet made progress toward their goal, and when the goal is non-numeric (e.g., “do your best”) and therefore does not provide a reference point. Studies 5A and B test these boundary conditions.

STUDY 5A: SETTING A GOAL AFFECTS PREFERENCE AMONG MEANS ONLY ONCE PROGRESS IS MADE

In study 5A, we vary whether people make progress using the initial means, as opposed to choosing among the means before making progress. Because we argue that setting a goal increases the perceived relative effectiveness of means when they are used to progress toward a goal, we predicted that setting a goal will only affect choice among participants who made progress (hypothesis 3a).

Method

We opened this study to 800 participants on Mechanical Turk (MTurk), and 734 participants (66% female and 32% male, mean age 33 years) passed all screeners and completed the study.¹² Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (goal vs. no-goal) $\times$ 2 (progress vs. no-progress) design. The progress conditions were identical to study 1A. In the no-progress conditions, participants were not told of an initial task and did not solve any anagrams. Instead, they chose which task to work on (whereas participants in the progress conditions chose between continuing to work on anagrams or switching to letter counting): “At this point, you may decide to either spend the allocated

¹² Because we used screeners at both the start and end of this study, participants were excluded after completing the survey, resulting in a final sample that was smaller than the recruited sample.

(remaining) time working on Anagrams or on Letter Counting. If you choose to work on (switch to) Letter Counting, you will (keep the money you earned and) spend the allocated (remaining) time working on Letter Counting tasks, and earn \$0.03 for every correct solution.” Participants did not work on their chosen task after making their decision.

Results and Discussion

Setting a Goal Affected Preferences Only After Participants Made Initial Progress. We predicted that when participants make progress using an initial means, setting an explicit goal would reduce switching to an alternative means of pursuit, but when participants do not make progress, setting a goal would not affect preferences among means. To test this, we conducted a logistic regression with goal condition (0 = no goal, 1 = goal), initial-means-progress condition (0 = no progress, 1 = progress), and their interaction term as the independent variables, and decision of which task to pursue (0 = anagram, 1 = letter counting) was the dependent measure. We found a main effect of *progress* on task choice ($b = -0.56$, $SE = 0.21$, $p = .009$) and, more relevant to our hypothesis, a significant *goal* $\times$ *progress* interaction ($b = -0.63$, $SE = 0.31$, $p = .041$). We conducted a series of chi-square tests to explore this interaction. Consistent with our previous findings, participants in the *progress* conditions were less likely to choose the letter-counting task when they set an explicit goal than when they had not ($P_{\text{goal}} = 39\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 54\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 8.55$, $p = .003$). In the *no-progress* conditions, however, setting a goal did not affect task choice ($P_{\text{goal}} = 68\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 68\%$, $\chi^2(1) < 0.01$, $p = .966$).

These results support our theory that setting a goal affects preferences due to monitoring progress toward the goal. They also rule out the possibility that setting a goal makes anagrams more attractive for some other reason (such as valuing a more skill-based task). If this were the case, setting a goal would have increased choice of anagrams regardless of initial progress.

Consistent with past work on inertia and the status quo bias (Suri et al. 2013), we found that in the absence of an explicit goal, participants were less likely to prefer letter counting if they already tried one anagram ($P_{\text{progress-no-goal}} = 54\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-progress-no-goal}} = 68\%$; $\chi^2(1) = 6.90$, $p = .009$). Our main contribution is that setting a goal *exacerbates* inertia ($P_{\text{progress-goal}} = 39\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-progress-goal}} = 68\%$; $\chi^2(1) = 29.96$, $p < .001$).

STUDY 5B: THE EFFECT OF SETTING A GOAL ON SWITCHING IS ATTENUATED FOR NON-NUMERIC GOALS

In study 5B, we vary whether the goal is numeric (e.g., “earn 20 cents”) or non-numeric (e.g., “earn money” or “do

your best”) to test whether the effect of setting a goal on switching depends on whether initial progress is evaluated against a reference point. We propose that because non-numeric goals do not provide a clear reference point for measuring progress (Heath et al. 1999; Kivetz, Urminsky, and Zheng 2006), their effect on switching would be weaker (hypothesis 3b). Study 5B was preregistered (https://aspredicted.org/F7K_FDJ).

Method

We opened the study to 800 participants on Prolific, and 805 participants (53% female and 45% male, mean age 42 years) completed the study. Study 5B closely followed the design of study 3A, excluding the effectiveness measures, with one exception: in addition to the no-goal and numeric goal conditions, we included two additional goal conditions, resulting in a four-cell design (goal: no goal vs. numeric earnings vs. general earnings vs. do your best). When setting their goal, participants in the general-earnings condition read, “During this study, we want you to have a goal to earn money. Please check the box below to indicate that you will try to earn money,” and clicked a box next to, “I will try to earn money during the survey.” In the do-your-best condition, participants instead read, “During this study, we want you to have a goal to do your best on any task you pursue. Please check the box below to indicate that you will do your best,” and clicked a box next to, “I will do my best on any task I pursue during the survey.” Like in previous studies, participants in all goal conditions saw a reminder of their goal at the top of subsequent pages (e.g., “Remember, you committed to a goal to do your best.”).

Next, as an attention check, participants in the goal conditions selected the statement that best described their goal: “Earn money working ONLY on Anagram tasks,” “Earn money working ONLY on Letter-Counting tasks,” “I’m not sure,” and a final option depending on their goal condition, with “Earn [participant’s chosen goal] cents” in the numeric-earning goal condition, “Earn money during the survey” in the general-earning goal condition, and “Do my best during the survey” in the do-your-best goal condition. All participants then attempted the same two anagrams as in study 3A, chose which task to proceed with, continued working on their chosen tasks until the time was up, and received the bonus they earned.

Results and Discussion

Only the Numeric Goal Significantly Reduced Switching. Overall, there was an effect of goal condition on the decision to switch means ($\chi^2(3) = 13.63$, $p = .003$). However, the type of goal moderated the effect. Replicating our previous findings, participants who set a numeric money goal were less likely to switch than those who did not set a goal ($P_{\text{numeric-earnings}} = 44\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 58\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 8.39$, p

= .004). Participants who set a numeric goal were also less likely to switch than participants who set a general earnings goal ($P_{\text{numeric-earnings}} = 44\%$ vs. $P_{\text{general-earnings}} = 61\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 11.73$, $p < .001$) or a do-your-best goal ($P_{\text{numeric-earnings}} = 44\%$ vs. $P_{\text{do-your-best}} = 54\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 4.03$, $p = .045$).

In contrast, nonspecific goals (do your best and general earnings) did not significantly affect switching relative to not setting a goal ($P_{\text{general-earnings}} = 61\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 58\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 0.28$, $p = .599$; $P_{\text{do-your-best}} = 54\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 58\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 0.80$, $p = .372$) and did not significantly differ from each other ($\chi^2(1) = 2.02$, $p = .156$). Sixty-eight participants failed the comprehension check. Removing them from analysis does not qualitatively change the results (web appendix A5). These findings are consistent with the prediction that setting a goal affects the decision to switch means due to providing a reference point for evaluating the initial means.

STUDY 6: SETTING A GOAL DOES NOT REDUCE SWITCHING IF PEOPLE ARE PROMPTED TO CONSIDER ADVANTAGES OF BOTH MEANS

Our final study introduces a theory-driven strategy to mitigate the counterproductive effect of setting a goal on switching. We propose that when people pursue an explicit goal, they focus on how the current means helped them advance toward the goal rather than on how alternative means might do so. This suggests that prompting people to consider how *both* means could advance the goal—instead of focusing solely on the initial means—should moderate the effect of setting a goal on switching (hypothesis 4). Study 6 was preregistered (<https://aspredicted.org/s7vn-x46g.pdf>).

Method

We opened the study to 600 participants on Prolific, and 603 participants (48% female and 51% male, mean age 38 years) completed the study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (goal vs. no-goal) $\times$ 2 (prompt vs. no-prompt) design. Study 6 was similar to study 3A, with one exception: before making the switching decision, participants in the *prompt* conditions listed some advantages of the anagrams task and some advantages of the letter-counting task. All participants continued working on their chosen task for the allotted time and received the bonus they earned.

Results and Discussion

Setting a Goal Did Not Affect Switching If Participants Were Prompted to Consider the Advantages of Both Means. Overall, setting a goal reduced the likelihood of switching ($P_{\text{goal}} = 57\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 66\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 5.45$, p

= .020). Replicating previous studies, this effect was significant among participants in the no-prompt conditions ($P_{\text{goal}} = 47\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 62\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 5.61$, $p = .013$). However, setting a goal did not significantly affect switching among participants who listed the advantages of both tasks before deciding whether to switch ($P_{\text{goal}} = 66\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 70\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 0.42$, $p = .439$). Although the *goal* $\times$ *prompt* interaction was NS ($b = 0.39$, $SE = 0.34$, $p = .254$), the intervention to consider the advantages of both means significantly increased switching among participants who set a goal ($P_{\text{prompt}} = 66\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-prompt}} = 47\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 9.60$, $p = .001$). Fifty-nine participants failed the comprehension check. Removing them from analysis does not qualitatively change the results (web appendix A6). This study thus identifies a way to avoid the negative effect of setting a goal on switching: actively considering the advantages of both means.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Although extensive research shows that setting a goal often promotes goal-consistent behavior, the current work identifies a novel reason why setting goals can backfire. Across 13 studies and four supplemental studies, using both incentive-compatible and hypothetical designs, we demonstrate that setting an explicit goal and making progress using an initial means decreases the likelihood of switching to alternative means, even when those alternatives may be more effective for pursuing the goal. Table 2 presents the effects of setting a goal on switching across all studies. Setting a goal decreases switching because the initial means is perceived to be more effective relative to alternatives when it is used to progress toward an explicit goal. Goals provide a reference point that people can use to monitor their progress; because people shift focus to how the initial means have contributed to goal progress and away from how alternative means may help pursue the goal, the initial means is perceived as more effective relative to alternatives.

Setting a goal reduced switching across a variety of domains, including nutrition, investments, and task performance (studies 1A–3C and 5A–6). Participants who used an initial means to pursue an explicit goal perceived the initial means as more effective relative to alternative means, compared with participants who used the initial means without an explicit goal. Ratings of perceived relative effectiveness partially mediated the effect of setting a goal on the decision to switch means (studies 3A–C). Setting a goal did not affect choice of means if participants did not yet make initial progress (study 5A) and when the goal was non-numeric (study 5B). Finally, setting a goal did not significantly decrease switching for people who were prompted to consider the advantages of *both* means (study 6).

TABLE 2

PROPORTION OF PARTICIPANTS WHO SWITCHED TO AN ALTERNATIVE MEANS, BY EXPERIMENTAL CONDITION (STUDIES 1A–6)

Experiment	No goal	Goal (post-means-reveal)	Goal (pre-means-reveal)	χ^2	p-value
Study 1A N = 399	49%	33%	—	10.57	.001
Study 1B N = 609	57%	45%	44%	5.38 ^a 6.41 ^b	.020 .011
Study 1C N = 801					
Means trial	46%		36%	4.05	.044
No means trial	41%	—	28%	7.65	.006
Study 2A N = 400	80%	—	65%	11.16	< .001
Study 2B N = 399	61%	—	46%	8.71	.003
Study 2C N = 402	56%	35%	—	17.87	< .001
Study 3A N = 401	62%	46%	—	11.34	< .001
Study 3B N = 199	77%	61%	—	5.99	.014
Study 3C N = 298	58%	41%	—	8.41	.004
Study 5A N = 734					
Progress	54%	39%	—	8.55	.003
No progress	68%	68%	—	< 0.01	.966
Study 5B N = 805	No goal 58%	Numeric-earnings 44%	—	7.82	.005
	General earnings 61%	Do your best 54%	—	0.18 ^c 0.63 ^d	.671 .429
Study 6 N = 603					
No prompt	62%	47%	—	5.61	.013
Prompt	70%	66%	—	0.42	.439

^aNo goal vs. goal-post-reveal^bNo goal vs. goal-pre-reveal^cNo goal vs. general-earnings^dNo goal vs. do-your-best

We tested potential alternative accounts, but none fully explained the effect of setting a goal on switching. First, although some participants may have conflated their goal to achieve an outcome (e.g., earn \$0.20) with a goal tied to a specific means (e.g., solve 10 anagrams), the effect persisted when people set a goal before knowing which means they would use first (study 1B). Furthermore, removing participants who mischaracterized the goal did not affect the findings of our other studies (2C, 3A, 5A, and 5B). Second, across studies, we found that goals did not improve performance on the initial task, which could have explained the decreased switching. Moreover, the effect persisted when initial progress was held constant across participants (studies 2A and C).

Third, it is possible that goals increase aversion to unfamiliar means. Because goals act as reference points, falling short can feel more consequential than exceeding the goal by the same margin (Heath et al. 1999). This asymmetry

may make people more averse to trying unfamiliar means when trying to complete an explicit goal. This suggests that the effect of setting an explicit goal on the decision to switch means should be stronger when the alternative means are less familiar. However, the effect persisted when people were familiar with both means (study 1C) and when initial progress provided no more certainty about the initial means than about the alternatives (study 2C). Still, although uncertainty does not seem to fully explain our findings, it may strengthen the effect of setting a goal on the decision to switch in other situations, such as when people are much more certain in their ability to complete a goal with their current means than with alternative means. Our findings only show that greater certainty about the initial means is not a necessary condition for setting a goal to reduce switching.

Our theory proposes that a means feels more effective *relative* to alternatives if it is used to pursue an explicit

goal, but it does not predict how setting a goal influences the *absolute* perceived effectiveness of either means. The effect on the individual means was inconsistent across our studies: setting a goal increased the perceived effectiveness of the initial means in studies 3A and C but not in study 3B and decreased the perceived effectiveness of the alternative means in study 3A and marginally in study 3B. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that setting a goal seems to affect the perceived effectiveness of alternative means more than the initial means (studies 3A, 3B, and 4). Although unexpected, it is plausible that perceptions are more malleable for alternative means that have not yet been used and whose characteristics are therefore less well-defined.

This pattern also aligns with prior research showing that when cognitive and motivational resources shift toward an active goal, alternative goals and their associated means are devalued more than evaluations of the focal goal or means are enhanced (Brendl et al. 2003; Friedman et al. 2018; Van Osselaer and Janiszewski 2012). Relatedly, forming implementation intentions reduces the likelihood of using out-of-plan means partly because people pay less attention to alternatives (Masicampo and Baumeister 2012; Parks-Stamm et al. 2007). So, although inconclusive in our studies, the pattern in our data, combined with past research, suggests that making progress toward a goal using the initial means may decrease the perceived effectiveness of alternative means more than it improves perceptions of the initial means.

Finally, although we find that setting a goal only affects preference after people have made progress using the initial means, we did not explore situations in which people *plan* to use an initial means but have yet to make progress. Our theory predicts that monitoring progress toward the goal leads people to view the initial means as more effective relative to alternatives, so setting a goal should reduce switching only once progress is made, regardless of whether people have planned to use the initial means. To test this, we ran a supplementary study similar to study 5A, except that in the no-progress condition, participants were informed they would start with the initial means but never actually did (web appendix S3). As predicted, setting a goal decreased switching after participants made progress ($P_{\text{goal}} = 42\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 65\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 20.34$, $p < .001$) but not before ($P_{\text{goal}} = 39\%$ vs. $P_{\text{no-goal}} = 40\%$, $\chi^2(1) = 0.02$, $p = .884$). Surprisingly, participants who made progress were *more* likely to switch means than participants who only planned to use the means, counter to the typical effects of inertia. Thus, other processes may operate alongside our effect in such situations, such as heightened curiosity or anticipation.

Theoretical Contributions

The current research makes novel contributions to four streams of literature: goal pursuit, implementation intentions, the failure to make advantageous changes, and

opportunity cost consideration. First, previous research has shown that setting a goal increases the attractiveness of goal-consistent means, and among those, increases the attractiveness of more effective (compared to less effective) means (Laran et al. 2016). Whereas prior work showed that setting a goal affects choice based on the effectiveness of the means, we demonstrate that setting goals may also shape perceptions of effectiveness. Thus, we extend research on perceptions of instrumentality in goal pursuit, which has primarily shown that nonconscious priming can strengthen the association between goals and means, increasing perceived effectiveness (Bélanger et al. 2015; Zhang et al. 2007). Our findings suggest that monitoring progress toward a goal can similarly shift perceptions of effectiveness.

Additionally, by identifying a set of conditions under which setting a goal may hurt performance, we contribute to research on when goals backfire (Ordóñez et al. 2009). Although most work on setting goals has explored how goals improve performance, our work identifies a potential drawback. Existing work on how goals backfire has primarily focused on instances in which setting a goal hindered performance in a *non-goal* domain (Schweitzer, Ordóñez, and Douma 2004; Simons and Chabris 1999) or in which consumers set overly ambitious or unattainable goals (Cochran and Tesser 1996; Galinsky, Mussweiler, and Medvec 2002; Goldsmith, Friedman, and Dhar 2019). In contrast, our work demonstrates how setting an explicit goal may hinder performance in the domain of the goal and does not depend on the achievability of the goal. Nevertheless, we note that increasing commitment to an initial means can be beneficial in some circumstances.

By showing that people are less likely to switch to alternative means once they begin pursuing a goal, our work contributes to the literature on implementation intentions. Prior research shows that forming an implementation intention reduces engagement in out-of-plan, goal-consistent activities (Masicampo and Baumeister 2012; Parks-Stamm et al. 2007). An implementation intention essentially involves committing to a specific means. However, we show that setting a performance goal—rather than committing to use a particular means—also decreases the likelihood that people switch to alternative means, even though the goal was set at the level of the outcome, rather than at the level of the means.

We also contribute to research on why people fail to make advantageous changes by identifying a novel factor that reduces the likelihood of changing course. Extensive research on inertia and the status quo bias has shown that people often fail to take advantage of preferable options if they are already using less preferred ones (Lieberman et al. 2023; Suri et al. 2013). Prior work has identified several factors that increase inertia, such as loss aversion (Tversky and Kahneman 1991), concrete mindsets (Bayuk et al. 2010), and proximity to goal completion (Jhang and Lynch

Jr. 2015). Furthermore, people often rely on reinforcement learning and are likely to stick with methods that work (Worthy et al. 2013). We show that setting a goal can also increase inertia and reliance on a reinforcement learning strategy.

Finally, our findings contribute to the literature on opportunity cost consideration, which has found that consumers often neglect to consider outside options that are not salient (Frederick et al. 2009; Friedman et al. 2018; Spiller 2011). We advance this literature by identifying a new factor—setting a goal—that affects how people consider outside options. We show that setting a goal leads people to shift their focus toward the advantages of the initial means and away from advantages of alternative means. Our finding that setting a goal can hinder people from properly evaluating their opportunity costs aligns with research showing that people with a savings goal are more likely to take on debt rather than use their savings, even at a higher interest (Sussman and O'Brien 2016).

Practical Implications

This work documents a potential drawback of setting explicit goals. Consumers frequently set goals across various consumption contexts, and the most effective way for pursuing them may emerge after people begin pursuit. A consumer may discover a superior fitness class after they have already begun working toward their weight-loss goal, or their bank may introduce a higher-interest saving account after they have made several deposits. When consumers set such goals, our research suggests that they will be less likely to switch as alternative means become available, even if those means would be more effective.

To test whether consumers intuit the effect of setting goals on switching, we conducted a supplemental study in which 200 participants read a description of a study similar to study 1A and predicted which participant, if any, would be more likely to switch to the higher paying alternative task: someone who set an earnings goal or someone who did not (web appendix S4). Only 16% of respondents correctly predicted that a participant who did not set a goal would be more likely to switch, whereas 52% predicted the opposite and 33% expected no difference. This implies that people may not realize the potential counterproductive consequences of setting goals. Our work also provides a note of caution for managers who, if they hold similar beliefs, may encourage employees to set explicit goals, which could prevent their employees from switching to more effective means.

On the other hand, our research uncovers a novel mechanism, beyond the well-documented motivational benefits of setting goals, through which setting explicit goals can foster persistence when it is advantageous. For instance, fund managers could help their clients avoid switching fees by encouraging them to set an earnings goal before making

their first investment into a new fund. This may feel less restrictive to consumers than an explicit commitment to the initial fund.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The limitations of the current research present interesting avenues for further research. We demonstrated that setting a goal affects the perceived relative effectiveness of the initial means, which was associated with decreased switching. However, it is possible that setting a goal could instead *increase* the likelihood of switching via other mechanisms, such as by increasing the need to diversify or through greater motivation to expend effort. First, goals can highlight the remaining distance to completion (Heath et al. 1999; Kivetz, Urminsky, and Zheng 2006), which may heighten the need for diversification (Simonson 1990). For instance, setting a goal to cook 10 new recipes per month could make consumers *more* likely to use multiple cookbooks if the need for variety overwhelms any shift in perceived relative effectiveness.

Second, in our studies, switching means was virtually effortless. However, in many real-world contexts, switching may entail extra costs, such as searching, learning, or traveling. Because goals can increase willingness to invest effort (Latham and Locke 1991), setting a goal could increase switching when doing so is effortful but perceived as worthwhile. On the other hand, our studies were conservative in that we forced participants to pause pursuit and make an active choice between means. Goals may decrease switching even more in contexts in which consumers may pursue their goals without pausing to consider alternative means. Future research could explore these alternative mechanisms and potentially establish additional boundaries or conditions that exacerbate our effect.

Additionally, the goals we studied were all short-term, such as earning money or investing during the study. However, many consumer goals span much longer timeframes. Prior research has found that as people approach goal completion, they are less likely to interrupt pursuit (Jhang and Lynch Jr. 2015), which suggests that our effect may strengthen as progress toward the goal increases. However, progress is more likely to be exaggerated early in goal pursuit (Huang, Zhang, and Broniarczyk 2012), which may cause perceived effectiveness to shift more at the beginning of pursuit. Future work could explore how the effect of setting a goal on switching varies with the time horizon and degree of progress toward the goal.

Future research can also explore whether the effect is moderated by individual traits such as need for closure. Past research has found that people with a high need for closure are more likely to inhibit alternatives or shield their active goal than those with a lower need for closure (Shah, Friedman, and Kruglanski 2002). In the current context,

those with a high need for closure may therefore be even less likely to switch.

Finally, in our studies, participants were already motivated to pursue the goal, even if they did not explicitly set one. Participants on MTurk and Prolific are interested in making money, and our meal-plan study specifically recruited participants who try to eat healthy. Thus, we only manipulated whether participants set an explicit goal, not whether they had the goal at all. In contexts in which people might not have a goal unless they explicitly set one, our results may not hold, as people may lack the motivation to consider and switch to alternative means. Therefore, our findings may be most relevant to consumers who already have an implicit goal and are seeking the most effective way to achieve it.

Conclusion

People are less likely to switch to alternative means if they set an explicit goal before making progress with their initial means. This occurs because initial means feel more effective relative to alternative means if they were used to make progress toward an explicit goal rather than being used without an explicit goal in mind. When switching would have led to better outcomes, setting a goal may result in worse performance.

DATA COLLECTION STATEMENT

The first and second authors collected all data using Prolific or Amazon Turkprime between late 2020 and 2024. The first and second authors analyzed these data. The data and analysis code are stored in a project folder on the Open Science Framework and are available at https://osf.io/qzgs5/overview?view_only=d7b68092179e41b1878724d9bcdbd0ff.

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