ABSTRACT – Consumers’ goals vary greatly in the specificity of their objectives. Some consumers set specific budgets while others try to minimize their spending. While one consumer may aim to lose ten pounds, another may aim to lose as much weight as possible. We present three studies that explore how goal specificity changes the dynamics of motivation during goal pursuit. For both achievement-focused (e.g., task completion, weight loss) and restraint-focused goals (e.g., budgeting), specificity changes the relationship between progress along the goal dimension and subsequent motivation. Whereas consumers with specific goals accelerate toward them, consumers with non-specific goals grow less motivated as they move away from their initial-state reference point. These effects are mediated by changes in the subjective impact of incremental progress (Experiment 3) and influence experienced motivation (Experiments 1 and 2) as well as goal-directed choices (Experiment 3). Together the findings reveal important differences in the motivational dynamics of pursuing specific versus non-specific goals, with implications for marketing and consumer well being.
Consumers often adopt and pursue goals that lack specific objectives. This lack of specificity is by no means a sign that the goal is unimportant: a consumer with a financial goal to waste as little money as possible is no less concerned about his finances than one who sets a precise monthly budget. A tenured professor will not necessarily have specific goals about the number of papers he wants to publish in his career, nor the amount of time he wants to spend with his family each week, yet these may still be tremendously important goals for him.

We asked 149 online survey respondents (61% male, 19 to 82 years, mean age 35.1 years) to each list a series of personal goals and, subsequently, to mark whether or not each goal was associated with a specific objective. Of the 1192 goals reported (8 per participant), participants identified 51% (612 goals) as non-specific. Furthermore, when asked to rate how important each goal was to them, participants’ responses showed no correlation between specificity and importance ($r = .02, p = .48$). These results suggest that non-specific goals are as prevalent and as important as specific goals in consumers’ lives.

Despite the fact that non-specific goals are both common and important to consumer behavior, prior research has not yet examined the dynamics of how consumers pursue non-specific goals. This paper proposes that goal specificity will moderate the effects of goal progress on subsequent motivation. Prior research shows that consumers with specific goals exhibit a positive goal gradient, or increasing trend of motivation as progress accumulates (Hull 1932; Kivetz, Urminsky and Zheng 2006). We propose that consumers with non-specific goals will show the opposite trend, with motivation decreasing as progress along the goal dimension increases. In line with past research, we focus on motivation as a function of the subjective impact of incremental changes in goal progress (Bonezzi, Brendl and De Angelis 2011; Koo and Fishbach 2012; Heath, Larrick and Wu 1999). When an incremental step of progress seems
highly impactful, consumers are highly motivated to take that step. When an incremental step of progress does not seem impactful, consumers are much less motivated to take it.

We propose that, because non-specific goals push consumers to compare their progress to an initial-state rather than an end-state reference point, the subjective impact of incremental progress toward non-specific goals will decrease as progress accumulates (cf. Bonezzi et al. 2011). This means that, during the pursuit of a non-specific goal, consumers will be less motivated when they have made a large amount of progress along the goal dimension than when they have made less progress. Because these predictions are based on the subjective impact of incremental progress, we propose that such effects will emerge not only for achievement-focused goals (e.g., maximizing goals) but also for restraint-focused goals (e.g., minimizing goals). Just as consumers with achievement goals exhibit greater motivation (e.g., to study or exercise more) when the subjective positive impact of their actions seems large, consumers with restraint goals should exhibit greater restraint (e.g., to eat less or spend less money) when the subjective negative impact of their actions seems large. This means that we should observe similar changes in motivation over the course of non-specific achievement goals (e.g., maximizing goals) and over the course of non-specific restraint goals (e.g., minimizing goals).

This research makes three main contributions to our understanding of consumer goal pursuit. First, it takes a dynamic approach to examining how consumers pursue non-specific versus specific goals. Although prior research has shown overall effects of specificity on goal adoption and outcomes, this paper shows that specificity also moderates the relationship between progress and subsequent motivation during the process of goal pursuit. Second, the present research explicitly focuses on the important but understudied phenomenon of non-specific goals. Building on a framework of goals as reference points, we consider and test this framework’s
implications for the pursuit of non-specific goals. Namely, where prior work suggests a positive goal gradient as consumers accelerate toward specific goal objectives, we find that the lack of an end-state reference point for non-specific goals causes motivation to fall as progress accumulates. Third, this paper examines both achievement-focused goals (i.e. those where progress along the goal dimension is desirable) and restraint-focused goals (i.e., those where progress along the goal dimension is undesirable), offering a unifying explanation for the dynamics of motivation in both cases. Even though progress away from the initial-state reference point is desirable in the former case and undesirable in the latter, we show that it has the same effect on the subjective impact of marginal progress for both goal types.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we review relevant literature on goal specificity, reference points, and the dynamics of motivation during goal pursuit, developing our predictions for the dynamics of non-specific goal pursuit. Next, we present three studies supporting our hypotheses across various experimental paradigms and behavioral domains. We then discuss the implications of these findings for consumer wellbeing and conclude by highlighting promising avenues for further research.

**GOAL SPECIFICITY**

Consumers’ goals vary greatly in the specificity of their objectives. A dieter might specifically aim to lose ten pounds, or he might aim to lose as much weight as possible. A family might set up a specific weekly grocery budget, or they might try to restrain their spending as much as they can. As these examples suggest, similar behavioral intentions can often be framed in either a specific or a non-specific way. But what are the consequences of these differences in
goal specificity? Building on previous investigations of goal specificity, defined by the degree of “ambiguity or diffuseness in the exact level of performance required” (Wright and Kacmar 1994, p. 243; see also Naylor and Ilgen 1984), this paper examines the consequences of such ambiguity for consumer motivation.

Past research has emphasized the effects of specificity on goal adoption and performance. For example, individuals express greater commitment to assigned goals and are also less likely to change those goals if they are specific versus non-specific (Wright and Kacmar 1994). Specific goals also reduce the variability in performance outcomes across subjects (Locke et al. 1989) as well as across repeated trials (Wright and Kacmar 1994), although they do not necessarily improve performance (Locke et al. 1989). More recently, research on consumer savings goals has found that assigned goals were perceived as more important and more challenging if they had specific objectives than if they did not (Ulkumen and Cheema 2011). Other research has suggested a more negative side of specific goals: consumers are more likely to give up after performing badly on specific goals (Soman and Cheema 2004; see also Cochran and Tesser 1996), they behave more unethically when faced with unmet specific goals (Schweitzer, Ordonez and Douma 2004), and they may be more pessimistic about attainment when goals are specific versus non-specific (see Wright and Kacmar 1994). Notably, these findings largely emphasize static or aggregate effects of specificity, as opposed to possible dynamic changes in motivation over the course of goal pursuit. The present paper aims to fill this gap. We take a dynamic look at the consequences of goal specificity, examining how progress influences subsequent behavior when goals are specific versus non-specific.

In the present research, we focus on non-specific goals that do not have explicitly stated endpoints. We operationalize these as maximizing (non-specific achievement) and minimizing
(non-specific restraint) goals, where consumers aim to do as much or as little as possible in a particular domain without reference to any specific numbers. This approach aligns with the types of non-specific goals most often examined in prior research, generally termed “do-your-best” goals (Locke et al. 1989; Wright and Kacmar 1994). Note that some authors have argued that specificity lies along a spectrum, pointing to range goals (e.g., lose between 10 and 15 pounds) as an example of moderate specificity (Naylor and Ilgen 1984; Scott and Nowlis 2013). Although we agree with this characterization, our discussion of goal specificity focuses on the case of non-specific goals that lack an end-state reference point. Range goals, which are another important type of non-specific goal, actually include multiple end-state reference points. This could mean that the effects described in this paper would play out very differently in a range goal context; this remains an open avenue for future investigation (see General Discussion).

REFERENCE POINTS AND THE DYNAMICS OF MOTIVATION

In exploring the dynamic effects of goal specificity, we adopt a framework of goals as reference points (Heath et al. 1999). Within this framework, a number of motivational phenomena are explained by the fact that goals serve as salient reference points against which possible outcomes are compared. Building on the key features of reference points identified in Prospect Theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979), researchers have found that the utility of goal progress is concave above a reference point and convex below it (Heath et al. 1999). This means that the subjective impact of an incremental change in goal progress is highest near a salient reference point and diminishes when the reference point is more distant. This same effect gives rise to the Small-Area Hypothesis, which posits that individuals are more motivated by focusing
on accumulated progress early in goal pursuit and by focusing on remaining progress later (Koo and Fishbach 2012). In both cases, focusing on one’s distance from a relatively close reference point (i.e., a small area) increases the subjective impact of incremental progress. Similar phenomena have been observed in research on the psychophysics of goal pursuit, which emphasizes the role of perceptual mechanisms rather than the characteristics of the prospect curve (Bonezzi et al. 2011; Herrnstein and Prelec 1991). Despite this difference in focus, both streams of research emphasize the role of subjective impact: the more a given action is seen as contributing to one’s desired outcome, the more motivated one is to perform it (see Carver and Scheier 1998; Brendl and Higgins 1996).

So what does the framework of goals as reference points mean for the dynamics of motivation? First, in the case of specific goals, it predicts the well-known phenomenon of goal acceleration, or the “goal-looms-larger” effect (Hull 1932). When an individual is approaching a specific goal objective, the subjective impact of further progress toward that objective seems greater as the remaining distance to the objective diminishes, resulting in an increase in motivation (Bonezzi et al. 2011). For example, a dieter who has lost 8 out of a desired 10 pounds will see losing the next pound as more impactful (1 lb = 50% of the distance to his goal) than if he had lost just 5 out of 10 pounds so far (1 lb = 20% of the distance to his goal), and he will thus be more motivated to lose that next pound. The tendency for motivation and persistence to increase as one approaches a goal objective is exceedingly well documented (Hull 1932; Kivetz et al. 2006; Louro, Pieters and Zeelenberg 2007; Cheema and Bagchi 2011), and has been described as “the main insight from classic and modern research on motivation” (Koo and Fishbach 2012).
Researchers have identified several different mechanisms that contribute to this effect, including the increasing salience of goal rewards (Hull 1932; Cheema and Bagchi 2011), hyperbolic discounting of outcomes (Soman et al. 2005), and, most important to the current research, the function of goals as reference points (Heath et al. 1999; Koo and Fishbach 2012). When an individual is approaching a specific goal objective, the subjective impact of further progress toward that objective will seem greater as the remaining distance to the objective diminishes, resulting in an increase in motivation.

In the case of non-specific goals, however, we expect a different pattern to emerge. Consumers in a maximizing or a minimizing context do not have a specific end-point objective to serve as their reference point, so they have no particular point to accelerate toward. Instead, we propose that the most salient reference point in this context will be the starting point or initial state of goal pursuit (see Koo and Fishbach 2008, 2012; Wiebenga and Fennis 2014). Just like comparisons to any other reference point, comparisons to this initial state should result in the greatest subjective impact when that initial state is proximal (Koo and Fishbach 2012). When consumers are far away from their initial-state reference point, the subjective impact of incremental progress (and therefore motivation) should be reduced. Consumers with non-specific goals should thus show decreasing motivation as they move further along in their goal pursuits.

H1: Consumers with non-specific goals will show decreasing motivation as they make progress along the goal dimension.

H2: The effect described in H1 will be mediated by a decrease in the subjective impact of incremental progress.
H3: There will be a significant interaction between goal specificity and progress in predicting motivation, such that these simple effects (H1 and H2) will emerge only with non-specific goals.

In addition to having non-specific goals in achievement domains (e.g., lose as much weight as possible), consumers can also have non-specific goals in restraint domains (e.g., spend as little as possible). We reason that the subjective impact of goal-related actions is an essential predictor of motivation in both contexts. Our hypotheses and the mechanisms that underlie them should thus apply to non-specific achievement (e.g., maximizing) goals as well as non-specific restraint goals (e.g., minimizing goals).

We define restraint goals as goals that seek to limit the consumer’s movement along a focal goal dimension (e.g., dollars spent, calories eaten). Consumers may adopt restraint goals for their shopping habits (e.g., monthly budgets), for how they spend their time (e.g., limiting hours of television), or for any number of other self-control behaviors (e.g., counting calories). When consumers adopt specific restraint goals, they explicitly define their limit in the units of the goal dimension: $200 for entertainment expenses, 10 hours per week of television, or 2000 calories eaten per day. For these specific restraint goals, consumers can monitor performance relative to either the initial-state reference point (e.g., $0 spent at the beginning of the month) or the end-state reference point (e.g., $200 monthly budget for entertainment). Past research on similarly structured goals suggests that, as they approach the undesired end-state reference point, consumers become increasingly motivated to restrain their progress toward it (prevention goals, Higgins 1998; mental accounts, Thaler 1985; prepaid reward programs, Koo and Fishbach 2012). But what will happen when there is no end-state reference point available?
When consumers adopt non-specific restraint goals, such as a goal to minimize their monthly spending, they do not specify an end-state reference point. Just like non-specific achievement goals, non-specific restraint goals should push consumers to monitor their progress relative to their initial-state reference point. As they move away from this reference point (e.g., by spending more money or eating more calories), the subjective impact of marginal progress should grow smaller (see Bonezzi et al. 2011). This should produce the same patterns of motivation as hypothesized above for achievement goals. For example, in the context of personal budgeting, individuals with non-specific (i.e., minimizing) budgets should show decreased motivation when they have spent more money, mediated by a decrease in the subjective impact of additional spending. When the impact of spending additional money is diminished, these individuals should be more willing to spend money on subsequent purchases.

Three experiments tested our predictions about goal specificity and the dynamics of motivation. Experiment 1 provides an initial test of the interaction between goal specificity and progress in predicting consumer motivation during an effortful lab task. This experiment also examines our hypothesized effect of consumers with non-specific goals growing less motivated as progress accumulates. Experiment 2 replicates these findings in the context of personal weight loss goals. Experiment 3 tests the proposed mediating role of subjective impact and extends our investigation to the domain of restraint goals, replicating our findings in the context of consumer budgeting.

**EXPERIMENT 1: GOAL SPECIFICITY MODERATES THE EFFECT OF PROGRESS ON SUBSEQUENT MOTIVATION**
Experiment 1 provides an initial test of the relationship between progress and motivation during the pursuit of non-specific (maximizing) versus specific goals. The purpose of the study was to test whether specificity moderates the relationship between progress and motivation and to test for the hypothesized negative effect of progress on motivation for non-specific goals. We expected that completing sales in a Sales Simulation Game would reduce participants’ motivation when they had a maximizing goal but not when they had a specific sales goal.

**Method**

Participants (N=193) were recruited from the Stanford Behavioral Lab community pool. The study used a 2 (goal type: specific, maximizing) by 4 (progress level: 2, 4, 6 or 8 sales) between-subjects design.

Participants completed a Sales Simulation Game (adapted from Cheema and Bagchi 2011, Study 5). The objective of the game was to repeatedly complete a sequence of nine steps representing one “sale” until reaching a target number of sales. To complete each step, participants typed out a sentence describing the step when the sentence appeared on the screen (e.g., “Answer questions and address client concerns”). Participants in the specific goal condition received the following instructions: “Your goal is to make 10 sales before the time allotted for the game is over. If you complete the 10 sales in time, you will be entered into a lottery to win a $25 gift card after the end of the study.” Participants in the vague goal condition received the following instructions: “Your goal is to make as many sales as you can before the time allotted for the game is over. If you complete enough sales, you will be entered into a lottery to win a $25 gift card after the end of the study.”
All participants were given a running tally of their sales throughout the game, and were also reminded that they had completed 2 (4, 6, or 8) sales (specific condition: “out of 10”) at the top of the page where questions appeared.

After completing a portion of the game, participants were interrupted to answer a short set of questions. This interruption came after the participant had completed 2, 4, 6 or 8 sales, by condition. The target dependent variable, motivation, was measured on a seven-point scale (“How motivated are you to do well at the rest of the sales game?”) anchored by “Not motivated at all” (1) and “Extremely motivated” (7).

**Results**

Each participant’s assigned goal type was coded in a dummy variable (1 = specific; 0 = maximizing), and the number of sales each participant completed before reaching the questions page was recorded as a continuous variable. Average motivation scores in each condition are listed in Table 1 and also displayed in Figure 1.

A regression analysis of the joint influence of goal type and sales completed revealed a significant two-way interaction in predicting reported motivation (interaction $b = .284, t(189) = 2.343, p = .020$). As hypothesized, goal specificity moderated the relationship between goal progress and subsequent motivation. We tested for simple effects using two regression models with opposite coding on the specificity dummy variable (see Spiller et al. 2013). Consistent with prior research on specific goals, there was a positive trend for motivation as the number of completed sales increased in the specific condition, although this effect was not statistically significant ($b = .089, t(189) = 1.034, p = .303$). In the non-specific (maximizing) goal condition, we found the predicted negative effect of goal progress on subsequent motivation ($b = -.195$, 

Participants in the maximizing condition who had completed more sales reported lower motivation than those who had completed fewer sales.

**Discussion**

Experiment 1 provides initial support for our predictions. The effect of progress on subsequent motivation depends on the specificity of the goal. In line with prior research, individuals with specific goals maintained or slightly increased their motivation as they made additional progress. However, as we hypothesized, individuals with non-specific goals showed a significant decline in motivation as their total progress increased.

**EXPERIMENT 2: SPECIFICITY, PROGRESS AND MOTIVATION FOR WEIGHT LOSS GOALS**

Experiment 2 examines a prevalent and important domain of consumer goals: weight loss. This experiment provides a second test of the proposed relationship between goal specificity, progress and subsequent motivation during goal pursuit. In addition to replicating the findings of Experiment 1, this experiment also allows us to address a potential limitation of the prior study. The effortful lab task used in Experiment 1 may have gradually depleted participants’ self-regulatory resources, so that they would become worn out and lose motivation as they made progress. Experiment 2 alleviates the possible influence of this resource depletion by manipulating perceived (rather than actual) goal progress; in this design, participants in the two progress conditions should not differ in their level of energy or self-control. We hypothesize that participants in the maximizing goal condition will be less motivated at a high level of
progress than at a lower level of progress, and that goal specificity will moderate the relationship between progress and motivation.

**Method**

Participants who reported having a goal to lose weight (N = 113) were recruited from the Wharton Behavioral Lab pool. The experiment used a 2(goal type: specific, maximizing) by 2(progress feedback: high progress, low progress) between-subjects design.

Participants read that they were trying to lose weight over an eight-week period. In the specific goal scenario, the participant had set a goal to “lose 8 pounds over the next 8 weeks.” In the maximizing goal scenario, the goal was to “lose as much weight as you can over the next eight weeks.”

Next, participants were told to imagine that, after the first four weeks of the time allotted for their weight loss goal, they had lost a total of 5 pounds (high progress condition) or 3 pounds (low progress condition). After getting this progress feedback, participants responded to questions about how they expected they would feel and behave in this scenario. Participants were asked two questions to assess their weight loss goal motivation. These questions asked how motivated they were (“Not motivated at all” (1) to “Extremely motivated” (7)) and how hard they would be willing to work to lose weight (“Unwilling to work hard at all” (1) to “Willing to work extremely hard” (7)). Scores on these two items were averaged together to form a composite score of motivation.

**Results**
Results of a two-way ANOVA for motivation scores revealed a significant interaction between goal specificity and progress in Experiment 2 \((F(1, 109) = 4.93, p = .028; \text{Figure } 2)\). Consistent with prior work on specific goals, participants with a specific goal reported higher motivation in the high progress condition than in the low progress condition, although the difference was not statistically significant \((M_{\text{high}} = 5.68, M_{\text{low}} = 5.38, F(1,109) = .66, p = .418)\). As we had predicted, participants with a non-specific (maximizing) goal reported significantly lower motivation in the high progress condition than in the low progress condition \((M_{\text{high}} = 3.92, M_{\text{low}} = 4.75, F(1,109) = 5.64, p = .019)\). Just as we observed in Study 1, progress had a negative effect on subsequent motivation for individuals pursuing non-specific goals.

**Discussion**

Experiments 1 and 2 provide support for our hypothesis that goal specificity moderates the motivational effect of progress during consumer goal pursuit. Where prior work finds that concrete goal progress increases motivation for specific goals, we demonstrate that it decreases motivation for non-specific (maximizing) goals.

**EXPERIMENT 3: RESTRAINT GOALS AND THE UNDERLYING ROLE OF SUBJECTIVE IMPACT**

Experiment 3 has two key objectives. First, it provides direct evidence of the proposed mediating role of subjective impact in the observed effects of progress on subsequent motivation. Second, it extends our investigation to the domain of restraint goals by examining personal budgeting. When consumers seek to restrain their spending behavior, they can do so in either a
specific (i.e., specific budget) or a non-specific (i.e., minimizing) way. Just as in the case of achievement goals, these consumers make decisions about goal-related behavior (in this case, spending) based on the subjective impact of incremental movement on the goal dimension. When the subjective (negative) impact of additional spending is large, consumers should be highly motivated to restrain themselves and avoid that spending; when the impact of additional spending appears small, they should be less motivated.

In this experiment, we predicted that the effects of spending on subsequent motivation would be moderated by the specificity of consumers’ budgeting goals, and that consumers with non-specific (minimizing) goals would become less motivated when they had spent more. We predicted that these effects would be mediated by changes in the subjective impact of incremental spending.

**Method**

Subjects who self-identified as typically spending $450 or more on holiday gifts (N = 130) were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk for a study about holiday shopping behavior. The experiment used a 2(goal: specific budget, minimizing) by 2(spending level: low, high) between-subjects design.

Participants read that they were buying a series of holiday gifts for several friends and family members. In the specific budget condition, the participant had a goal to “buy gifts for all six people on your list while spending $450 or less in total.” In the minimizing condition, the goal was to “buy gifts for all six people on your list while spending as little money as you can manage.”
Next, participants were told to imagine that, after buying three of the six gifts, they had spent a total of $150 (low spending) or $300 (high spending). Participants then read about a shopping scenario where they would choose the next gift:

“The fourth person on your shopping list has told you that they're going on a big trip overseas in a few months and they would really like a new digital camera to take with them. You've decided to get them a camera, and after shopping around a bit you are still deciding between two options. One camera, Option A, has all of the features you were looking for, received good reviews online, and is made by a popular brand. Option A costs $79.99. The second camera, Option B, has the same major features but received mixed reviews online, and it is made by a brand that you haven't heard of before. Option B costs $54.99.”

After reading about this shopping scenario, participants rated which of the two options they were more likely to buy on a seven-point scale anchored by “Definitely Option A” (1) and “Definitely Option B” (7). This served as our measure of motivation, where participants who were more motivated to follow their goal and limit their spending would favor the inexpensive Option B (higher scale ratings).

Participants also rated how much they felt the $25 price difference would impact their gift budget on a scale anchored by “Not at all” (1) and “Very much” (7). This served as our measure of subjective impact, which we hypothesized would mediate the effects of spending level on subsequent motivation.

Results
**Motivation.** A two-way ANOVA on camera preference revealed the predicted interaction between specificity and spending level ($F(1,126) = 9.37, p = .003$; Figure 3). Consistent with prior work, participants with a specific budget showed greater preference for the inexpensive option (Option B) when they had spent more money so far than when they had spent less ($M_{high} = 3.17, M_{low} = 1.88, F(1,126) = 7.73, p = .006$). After a greater amount of initial spending, individuals with specific budget goals were more motivated to restrain their subsequent spending. Participants with a non-specific (minimizing) budget, however, showed (marginally) less preference for the inexpensive option when they had spent more money so far than when they had spent less ($M_{high} = 2.26, M_{low} = 3.09, F(1,126) = 2.60, p = .110$).

**Subjective Impact.** A two-way ANOVA on subjective impact revealed the predicted interaction between specificity and spending level ($F(1,126) = 34.26, p < .001$; Figure 4). Participants with a specific budget perceived that the additional cost of camera Option A would have more of an impact on their goal when they had spent more money so far than when they had spent less ($M_{high} = 4.76, M_{low} = 2.49, F(1,126) = 34.99, p < .001$). Participants with a minimizing goal showed the opposite effect, rating the subjective impact as smaller when they had spent more money so far than when they had spent less ($M_{high} = 3.61, M_{low} = 4.68, F(1,126) = 6.45, p = .012$).

**Underlying Process.** We next tested whether these differences in subjective impact produced the hypothesized indirect effects on motivation as reflected by goal-congruent choices. To test our hypotheses, we used bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals with 2000 bootstrap samples (see Hayes 2009; Hayes 2013). As predicted, the results showed that budget specificity significantly moderated the indirect effect of spending on motivation via subjective impact (Moderation index: $1.75, 95\%$ CI [0.93 to 2.86]). Consistent with prior research, we
found a positive indirect effect of spending on motivation for consumers with specific budgets ($ab = 1.18, 95\%\ CI [.71 to 1.83]). Participants with a specific budget saw incremental spending as more impactful when they were closer to their budget limit, and they were more motivated to restrain their spending as a result. In the non-specific (minimizing) goal condition, we found the predicted negative indirect effect of spending on motivation ($ab = -.56, 95\%\ CI [-1.22 to -.06]). Participants with a minimizing goal saw incremental spending as less impactful when they had spent more, and they were less motivated to restrain their spending as a result.

**Discussion**

The results of Experiment 3 provide substantial evidence for the proposed effects of subjective impact in the minimizing as well as the maximizing goal domain. Importantly, this experiment provides direct evidence that subjective impact mediates both the positive effect of spending on motivation for specific goals and the negative effect for non-specific goals. In addition, the fact that these patterns emerge for restraint goals as well as for achievement goals shows that the role of subjective impact is independent of the effects of perceived performance. Consumers near the specific reference point (i.e., the budget limit) in Experiment 3 are performing objectively worse than their low-spending counterparts, yet they still show the same increase in motivation as in the previous studies. In the non-specific condition, we see that greater progress away from the starting point (i.e., greater spending) leads to decreased motivation when it signifies poor performance (minimizing goal) as well as when it signifies strong performance (maximizing goal).

In Experiment 3, we find evidence of increasing motivation in the specific goal condition. This is in line with prior work, but also diverges somewhat from Experiments 1 and 2, which
only find a directional effect. Although the primary interest of the present investigation is understanding the motivational dynamics of non-specific goals, this difference is worth briefly discussing. Prior work suggests that acceleration toward specific goals should be weaker when the end-state reference point is not easily visualized (Bagchi and Cheema 2011) or heavily emphasized by the framing of progress feedback (Bonezzi et al. 2011; Koo and Fishbach 2012). It is possible that in Experiments 1 and 2, the end-state reference point was difficult enough to visualize, or both reference points were salient enough to mute the impact of progress on motivation. However, an analysis of the average effect size across experiments does support the prior finding that motivation to pursue specific goals increases with progress along the goal dimension. Average motivation is greater at high progress than at low progress in Experiment 1 (more than 5 vs. less than 5 sales complete, $d = .42$), in Experiment 2 (5 pounds vs. 3 pounds lost, $d = .29$), and in Experiment 3 ($300 spent vs. $150 spent, $d = .49$). Taking into account the sample size of each study, the overall effect across the three experiments is statistically significant ($d = .41$, 95% CI [0.14 to 0.68]). Collectively, these results support the prior finding that consumers grow more motivated as they move closer to specific goal objectives.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Non-specific goals are both a common and an important phenomenon in consumer behavior. Past research has identified a number of important differences between specific and non-specific goals, but has provided relatively little insight into the possible effects of goal specificity on the dynamic process of goal pursuit. This paper sheds light on the dynamic effects of pursuing specific versus non-specific goals. Adopting a framework of goals as reference
points, we offer a unified explanation for the dynamic effects of goal specificity on motivation in both the achievement and restraint goal domains. Three experiments provide evidence that consumers with non-specific goals are most motivated when they are near their initial reference point (i.e., low progress along the goal dimension) whereas consumers with specific goals are most motivated when they are near their specific objective (i.e., high progress). These effects are mediated by differences in the subjective impact of incremental progress, such that consumers are more motivated to take goal-oriented actions when those actions have a larger subjective impact on the goal.

Contributions

This paper makes three main contributions to research on consumer goal pursuit. First, taking a dynamic approach to the consequences of goal specificity, we show that progress shapes subsequent motivation differently during the pursuit of non-specific versus specific goals. Although prior research has shown overall effects of specificity on goal adoption and outcomes, this paper extends that work by examining how specificity influences the dynamic process of goal pursuit.

Second, we directly explore how consumers pursue non-specific goals. These goals constitute an important aspect of consumer behavior that has received relatively little attention in prior work. We adopt a framework of goals as reference points and examine this framework’s implications for how consumers pursue non-specific goals. Whereas prior work shows a positive goal gradient as consumers accelerate toward specific goal objectives, we find very different behavioral patterns for non-specific goals. In the absence of any salient end-state reference point, the subjective impact of incremental progress decreases as consumers’ total progress toward a
non-specific goal increases. This means that, across a variety of behavioral domains, consumers with non-specific goals show decreasing motivation as they make progress along the goal dimension.

Third, we explore the effects of specificity for both achievement goals and restraint goals. When consumers pursue achievement goals, they aspire to move forward along the goal dimension. This can mean advancing to a particular end-state objective (e.g., lose 8 pounds) or working to advance as far as possible along the goal dimension (e.g., maximize weight loss). When consumers pursue restraint goals, they do not want to move forward along the goal dimension. This can mean limiting one’s advancement on the goal dimension (e.g., dollars spent) to a specific amount (e.g., spend $450) or working to minimize one’s advancement on the goal dimension (e.g., spend as little as possible). Although progress along the goal dimension is desirable in the achievement domain and undesirable in the restraint domain, we show that such progress can have parallel effects across both domains. In both cases, consumers monitor the subjective impact of incremental progress by comparing their current progress to salient reference points. We show that both achievement-focused and restraint-focused goal pursuers are subject to a decline in subjective impact – and therefore a decline in motivation – over the course of pursuing non-specific goals.

**Implications for Marketers and Consumers**

The nuances of how consumers pursue and achieve non-specific goals have previously received little attention. Intuition suggests that consumers may frequently seek to regulate and direct their behavior without pre-committing to specific objectives. Pilot survey results confirm this intuition, with respondents reporting specific and non-specific personal goals in equal
numbers. Furthermore, respondents rate their specific and non-specific goals as equally important, demonstrating that non-specific goals cannot be dismissed as inconsequential. Non-specific goals are a prevalent and important part of consumers’ lives.

This paper highlights one way in which the structure of non-specific goals can create motivational challenges for consumers. We show that, because individuals with non-specific goals evaluate their progress relative to their initial-state reference point, incremental changes in progress seem less impactful as they move further along the goal dimension. This means that, as they accumulate progress, consumers with non-specific goals will feel less and less motivated and will perform poorly at their goals. For example, a dieter will become less successful at losing weight after a bit of initial weight loss, and a shopper will become less restrained in his spending after having initially spent some money.

These findings also suggest some ways in which marketers may need to adopt different strategies when dealing with customers with non-specific goals. Most notably, whereas marketers can encourage consumers to work toward specific consumption-related goals (e.g., loyalty program rewards, product collections) by emphasizing progress or even endowing progress (Nunes and Dreze 2006; Kivetz et al. 2006), these strategies are liable to backfire in the context of non-specific goals. Such issues are also likely to arise for group goals, as past research suggests that people attend to much of the same information when pursuing group goals as they do when pursuing personal goals (Koo and Fishbach 2008; Huang and Zhang 2011). Consequently, marketing communications aimed at encouraging participation in group goals (e.g., fundraising drives, petitions) should be framed differently for non-specific versus specific goals. Once a fair amount of progress has accumulated for non-specific group goals, consumers will feel that their contribution has very little impact on the overall goal and therefore be less
likely to participate. Marketers may be able to overcome this problem by directly bolstering the subjective impact of consumers’ individual contributions, or by encouraging comparisons to more proximal reference points (e.g., social comparisons, subgoals, prior performance) rather than the initial-state reference point.

**Opportunities for Future Research**

The present research brings us closer to understanding the full influence of goal specificity on consumer goal pursuit, but there remain a number of open questions for future research. We will touch briefly on three of these questions: the case of range goals, the question of motivation after passing a specific benchmark, and the possibility of focusing on alternative reference points when pursuing non-specific goals. All three are theoretically and practically important issues in consumer goal pursuit that could help to further illuminate the psychology of goal specificity.

*Range goal dynamics.* In the present research, as in the bulk of prior research on goal specificity, we compare goals with specific objectives to those without. These constitute the two ends of a continuous spectrum of goal specificity (see Naylor and Ilgen 1984). Over the years, a few researchers have examined cases of intermediate goal specificity – namely, range goals (Wright and Kacmar 1994; Scott and Nowlis 2013). Where purely non-specific goals have no explicit reference points associated with them, range goals actually have more reference points than specific goals do. A range goal has two specified reference points: the low and high endpoints of the target range. In this sense, range goals might be expected to exhibit goal dynamics similar to purely specific goals. Namely, subjective impact should increase as one approaches the low end of the range, and then increase again as one approaches the high end.
On the other hand, the dynamics of range goals may look entirely different from what we have reported here. The motivation trends in the present studies are driven by consumers’ relative focus on the initial state versus a specific future reference point when monitoring their progress during goal pursuit. When a third reference point is involved, we cannot make any predictions about motivation without first identifying which reference point will be most salient at a given level of progress. Does one of the range endpoints dominate throughout the process? Or do consumers always focus on the most proximal reference point – and does it matter if that point is ahead or behind them? These are open questions with the potential to offer valuable insights into the psychology of consumer goal pursuit.

**Motivation after the specific benchmark.** The studies presented here consider motivation at multiple levels of progress between the initial state and the stated objective of a specific goal. In general, both our findings and prior research suggest that motivation to pursue a specific goal tends to increase as one moves through this range. However, it is important to bear in mind that progress can continue beyond this range as well. In the promotion domain, intuition suggests that motivation will drop substantially after a specific objective is reached: after all, the goal is technically finished. Past research on goals as reference points supports this view. Because of consumers’ tendency to weight losses much more heavily than gains, incremental progress beyond the reference point has a much smaller subjective impact than before the reference point (Heath et al. 1999).

In the restraint or budgeting domain, both the intuition and the theory around this question are more complicated. If the budget is treated as a reference point where any spending beyond it constitutes a loss, then loss aversion should predict an increase in motivation after passing the specific budget limit. However, past research has found that consumers tend to treat
these limits as “all or nothing” goals; after violating a specific limit, consumers will often abandon the goal altogether (Soman and Cheema 2004). In a similar vein, research on the so-called “what the hell effect” has found that, after violating a specific daily calorie limit, individuals tend to “write off” the day and give up on dieting entirely until the following day (Cochran and Tesser 1996). These findings suggest that after passing their specific benchmark (i.e., the budget limit) consumers with restraint goals should immediately become unmotivated. Reconciling these two opposing effects – of loss aversion and of perceived goal violation – is an important question that merits empirical study.

**Alternative reference points.** We show that pursuing goals with no salient reference point other than the initial state can be problematic for consumers. Establishing a specific target end-state creates another salient reference point that helps to maintain motivation over the course of goal pursuit. There may be other ways to introduce new reference points and achieve similar benefits. For example, consumers might compare their level of progress to the progress that others have made, to their own expectations, or to their progress on similar goals in the past. Whereas a dieter who has lost ten pounds already might see the loss of an additional pound as fairly unimportant, that extra pound will seem much more impactful if a fellow dieter has lost eleven pounds in the same span of time. Even if exceeding others’ performance is not the primary objective, their performance offers a reference point that may be more motivating than comparisons to the initial-state reference point. Although such reference points are not always available, their potential as additional tools for enhancing consumer motivation merits further study.

**Conclusion**
In closing, three studies demonstrate that goal specificity changes the way that progress influences subsequent motivation during consumer goal pursuit. Prior research has found that consumers with specific goals tend to accelerate toward their goal objectives, becoming more motivated as they accumulate progress. The present research shows that consumers have the opposite tendency when pursuing non-specific goals, growing less motivated as their accumulated progress increases. In both cases, these motivational patterns are influenced by changes in the subjective impact of incremental goal progress. These findings shed new light on the dynamics of goal pursuit as well as the important and prevalent phenomenon of non-specific consumer goals.
TABLE 1 – Motivation scores by progress and goal type, Experiment 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal Type</th>
<th>Progress (Sales)</th>
<th>Motivation Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximizing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximizing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximizing</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximizing</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 1 – Motivation scores by progress and goal type, Experiment 1
FIGURE 2 – Motivation scores by progress and goal type, Experiment 2

Motivation Scores by Progress and Goal Type (Experiment 2)

Reported Motivation (1-7)

0 2 4 6 8 10

Goal Type

Specific Maximizing

Low Progress
High Progress
FIGURE 3 – Preferences by spending level and goal type, Experiment 3

Preference Scores by Spending and Goal Type (Experiment 3)

Note: higher preference scores favor the less expensive (i.e., more goal-congruent) option.

FIGURE 4 – Subjective impact by spending level and goal type, Experiment 3

Subjective Impact by Spending and Goal Type (Experiment 3)
REFERENCES


Wright, P. M., & Kacmar, K. M. (1994). Goal specificity as a determinant of goal commitment and goal change. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes.*