

DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

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“Essays on the consumer journey of planning for and
pursuing their goals”

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Consumers often find themselves on a goal pursuit journey. They set goals for themselves, make plans to achieve them, work towards their goals, and eventually succeed or fail to achieve their goals. This dissertation examines two crucial stages of this journey: planning (Chapter 1) and pursuing (Chapter 2).

In the first chapter, we focus on how people plan. Planning is an essential part of consumer’s daily lives, both for specific goal pursuit and for general life planning without a clear goal. Planning helps people remember what to do, organize their lives, and gather their self-control to work towards any goals they have. Therefore, it is crucial that we understand how people make their plans, and the various factors that could potentially affect planning. In this chapter, we show that breaking down a plan into detailed subcategories leads people to plan more for themselves, even when the subcategories are very arbitrary. For example, breaking down studying Italian words to studying Italian words of different categories leads people to plan to study more words. The effect is strong and robust across a variety of different goals and planning scenarios. We further show that the effect is driven by people perceiving the same amount of tasks to be less effortful when the plan is unpacked. However, these ambitious plans do not translate to actually completing more tasks. This suggests unpacking planning with binding plans could lead to overplanning, and potentially lead to stress, frustration, and failure to complete the plan.

In the second chapter, we explore how people behave differently when they are about to achieve their goal vs. when they are further from their goal. With field data of over 72,000 students from a large online education platform, we are able to closely examine student behavior under a gamified leveling-up mechanism. This mechanism is a commonly used strategy for platforms to keep users engaged, and students can achieve different proficiency levels for the subject they are learning. We hypothesize that students are less likely to use hints (which results in failing the question) and spend longer on each question when they are about to level up or level down. The effect might be particularly strong among those who have leveled down before and are more motivated to get to a higher level. We are also interested in exploring how intermediate goals (leveling up) interact with the ultimate goal (learning the subject) and see whether these intermediate goals will lead to suboptimal learning behaviors.