The Effect of Goal Specificity on Goal Commitment and Satisfaction

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Abstract

Consumers make decisions on a daily basis. They decide to save 500 euro (specific goal) for a vacation, or they decide they want a grade between a 7 and a 9 (range goal) for a thesis. This research conducted 2 studies that considered these 2 types of goals and looked for differences between satisfaction and goal commitment. The outcomes of both types of goals were further divided into low and high values. In study 1 participants were in an imaginary diet scenario and had 1 week left to achieve their goal. In study 2 participants looked at a hypothetical outcome of a running contest. Results show that when people are confronted with a high hypothetical outcome, they are more satisfied with a range goal, than with a specific goal. No differences in commitment were found between specific and range goals. Thus, this study suggests that chances are higher that people are more satisfied with the outcome of range goals than those of specific goals.
The Influence of Goal Specificity on Goal Commitment and Satisfaction

Consumers are often confronted with situations where they have to make a decision whether they want to reengage a goal. For instance, they decide to save money for the new couch they have been longing for for years. Or finally go the gym to lose the extra pounds they gained from the holidays. Setting goals is important for people. There is something about goals that makes them motivating.

Research has found that the perceived progress tends to increase motivation (Kivetz, Urminsky, and Zheng 2006, Soman and Shi 2003, Drèze and Nunes 2011). These studies have looked at the likelihood of completing goals as a function of how much progress has been made towards that goal. For instance, Dreze and Nunes (2011) used frequent flier program data that they obtained from a major U.S based international airline and determined that frequent flyers are more likely to fly as they approach a free flights that they obtained with their Air Miles.

Heath, Larrick and Wu (1999) believe that goals are motivating because they serve as reference points. Outcomes are systematically altered as described by the psychological principles in the value function of the Prospect Theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). The Prospect theory shows us that people do not see outcomes as a neutral occurrence; it is either a success or a failure. The reference point marks this distinction. Outcomes are subsequently accompanied by the matching positive- or negative emotions. Losses are also experienced more painful than gains.

Consider the example of Janneke and Jip following workout plans that usually involve 25 push-ups. Janneke changes that pattern and tries to do 30 push-ups instead and quits after 35 push-ups. Jip sets a goal of performing 38 push-ups and quits after 35 push-ups. When participants were asked how Janneke and Jip felt, all participants (100%) in this study
indicated that Janneke experienced positive feelings and Jip negative feelings. People thus, try to avoid losses and become more motivated to achieve their goals.

The last principle of the prospect theory states that outcomes that are more distant from the reference point have a smaller marginal impact on the satisfaction. For example, the pleasure one would have if his or her profit would go from 10 to 20 would be felt more intense than an increase from 110 to 120. The same goes for losses; a loss from 10 to 20 is felt more intense than a loss from 110 to 120. This principle could possibly explain the results of this study.

At this moment there is a debate in the literature going on about which type of goal is better: specific- or abstract goals. Several studies have looked at the distinction between specific and abstract goals in order to provide clarity. Now both sides have their reasons to believe that that particular type of goal leads to more satisfaction and/or motivation.

Proponents for abstract goals found that specific goals can focus attention so narrowly that other important factors may suffer (Ordonez, Schweitzer, Galinsky & Bazerman, 2009). In a well-known study, participants had to watch a video in which basketball players passed a ball around. Participants had to count the number of passes but they entirely failed to notice a man wearing a black gorilla suit in the center of the screen (Simons and Chabris, 1999). Thus, intense concentration caused people to overlook an important element in their visual perception. Everything other than the goal seemed unrelated and this can have harmful consequences.

According to Galinsky, Mussweiler, & Medvec (2002) and Neale & Bazerman (1985), specific goals even result in riskier strategies than those who focus on more abstract goals. They demonstrated this by observing negotiators with specific versus abstract goals. Specific goals resulted more often in a failure to reach an agreement.
In a similar vein, Schweitzer, Ordonez & Douma (2009) demonstrated that specific goals can even lead to more unethical behavior. In a laboratory they conducted an experiment in which participants had to carry out anagram tasks in 7 experimental rounds and subsequently check on their own work. The latter gave an opportunity to engage in unethical behavior by lying about their performance. The participants in a goal condition created more valid words than participants who were simply doing their best, but they had a higher average overstatement score than the participants in the do-your-best condition. Thus, creating a specific condition by setting a goal promoted unethical behavior.

However, there are also studies that indicate that specific goals have their benefits (as opposed to abstract goals). One of these studies was implemented by Locke and Bryan (1967). They investigated the relationship between conscious goals and task performance. Participants were in a complex coordination task where they used foot pedals to illuminate a pattern of green lights to match a pattern of red lights. In this condition one half of the participants got a specific performance goal. This goal for the upcoming trial was determined by a fixed increment that was based on the best score in the previous trial. The other half was told to do their best and did not receive any feedback about their performance. One of their findings was that specific goals resulted in a better performance. Locke and Latham (2009) suggested that the more specific or explicit the goal is, the more precisely performance can be regulated. “Concrete goals provide purposes to otherwise meaningless tasks; it provides a sense of accomplishment and a standard for assessing personal effectiveness” (Locke and Latham, 2009, p. 20). Goals give direction to a person’s pursuit.

In another study, Mossholder (1980) researched the effects of goal type on intrinsic motivation. Participants were randomly assigned to two conditions of goal setting (specific versus no goal) and two conditions of initial task interest (interesting versus boring). In the interesting task condition, participants constructed an asymmetrical “erectorcar” based on a
model used by Pinder (1976). The boring task consisted of joining one type of Erector set parts into pairs using three nuts and three bolts. These pairs were taken from one big pile of identical parts. Mossholder found that participants without a reference point (goal) were more satisfied about their performance than participants who were given a reference point (5.65 and 4.80 in the interesting job condition). There was more satisfaction amongst these participants despite the fact that goal participants outperformed the no-goal participants by about 15%. So setting a specific goal led to a better performance but less satisfaction than the no-goal condition.

Foregoing research by Locke and Bryan (1967) and Mossholder (1980) suggested that specific goals lead to a better performance than abstract- or no goals. Locke, Chah, Harrison and Lustgarten (1989) wondered if this effect was still present if goal specificity got separated from goal difficulty. They conducted two experiments to provide support for their hypotheses that goal difficulty affects overall performance whereas goal specificity affects the variability. The first experiment they conducted was a simple reaction time task. The participants saw a red signal light and they had to depress a button when they either got a verbal “ready signal” or in response to the signal light. The time lapse varied randomly between 1 and 5 seconds. The second experiment was an idea generation task. The participants had to list ways in which the undergraduate business and management program could be improved. The results of the studies supported the hypotheses; specific goals lead to less variability in the outcomes whereas more difficult goals lead to a better overall performance. So specific goals per se, do no lead to a better performance.

Recent research however, has been investigating the differences between specific and range goals. Scott and Nowlis (2013) examined whether the type of goal that is set has an effect on the likelihood that consumer would want the reengage the goal. They proposed that goals influence consumer goal reengagement through feelings of accomplishment. Prior
research on feelings of accomplishment shows that they are likely influenced by two major factors: (1) what they perceive to be possible and attainable and (2) what they aspire to achieve (Latham and Locke 1991). The idea was that range goals offer the best of both worlds in terms of challenge and attainability. The lower range value would seem attainable and the lower range would seem a challenge. Specific goals (a single number) were not thought to be both as challenging and attainable as range goals. They conducted five studies that offered support for their hypotheses. In study 1 and 2 they examined the impact of goal type on reengagement in 2 different goal scenario’s. Study 3 considered a very low- and a very high specific goal to indicate that these goals correspond with a more attainable- and a more challenging goal respectively. Study 4 included a boundary condition where the participants required no skill to engage their specific- or range goal. Lastly, study 5 looked at both actual reference points established in setting actual goals, and irrelevant reference points. So according to Scott and Nowlis (2013) consumers are more likely to reengage a goal with a range goal than with a specific goal.

The present study continues the work of Scott and Nowlis (2013), and examines whether the significant differences between specific and range targets can be replicated. In their study however, the focus was on 1 type of scenario: participants looked at an imaginary outcome of a goal. In this research participants were 9 weeks on an imaginary diet and had 1 week left to achieve their goal. Another difference is that the present study further divides the outcome of the type goals into low and high values. According to the Prospect Theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), gains are experienced less severe than losses so taking different measurement points into account might result in different outcomes.

Finally, several studies demonstrate that there is a difference in both performance and satisfaction between a specific- and a no-goal condition. Specific goals led to a better performance but to less satisfaction. (Mossholder, 1980; Ivancevich, 1977; Latham & Yukl,
A study by Cooper (1973) provides a possible explanation. He proposes that subjects working without task goals are driven by the characteristics of the task itself. The absence of a goal makes the task itself more intrinsically appealing.

So differences between goal- and no goal condition in relation with satisfaction got attention in the literature, yet it is unknown whether the type of goal (specific or range) also results in differences in satisfaction. Looking at the Prospect Theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), it seems plausible that chances are higher that people label an outcome with a specific goal as a failure. When you for instance end up saving a total of 400 euros for a vacation, it would seem like a success when you had a range goal of saving between 400 and 600 euros. The same outcome with a specific goal of 500 euros and you would label this as a failure because this is below the reference point (goal).

Therefore, the first hypothesis is that range goals lead to more satisfaction than specific goals. The second hypothesis states that goal type (specific- or range goals) influences interest in goal commitment. In order to replicate the findings of Scott and Nowlis (2013), range goals are thought to lead to more goal commitment than specific goals.

Two studies were conducted to investigate these hypotheses: study 1 examined the impact of the type of goal (specific- versus range goal) on satisfaction and goal commitment in an imaginary diet scenario. In Study 2 participants looked at a hypothetical outcome of a running contest. The questions measured the corresponding satisfaction and the commitment for an upcoming running contest.
Study 1

The purpose of study 1 is to replicate the findings of the study of Scott and Nowlis (2013) in a different scenario. Participants in the present study were in a scenario where the interpretation of the outcome was dependent of their current status (as opposed to a scenario where participants looked at a hypothetical outcome). In order to replicate the findings of Scott and Nowlis, range goals would have to lead to more commitment than specific goals. In addition, the outcomes were divided into high and low values and it is hypothesized that low range goals lead to more satisfaction than specific goals.

Method

This study was a one factor between-subjects experiment including 389 female participants in the first analysis ($M_{age} = 21.44, SD = 3.25$) and 253 participants in the second analysis (i.e. $M_{age} = 21.61, SD = 3.733$). The participants were all students who participated on a voluntary basis on the campus of Tilburg University. The participants read an imaginary diet scenario in which 9 weeks already passed and there was 1 week left to achieve the goal to lose a certain amount of kilograms (amount depends on the condition). Table 1 shows the eight different conditions in which the participants were randomly assigned.

The first question measured the satisfaction of the participants with their current progress towards their goal on a scale from -3 (very unsatisfied) to 3 (very satisfied).

Next, we measured motivation by asking participants how motivated they were in the last week of their diet and how motivated they would be to continue with their diet after the 10 week period (both questions on the same -3 to 3 scale as the first question).

The following 6 questions about commitment to the diet were answered on a scale from 1 to 5 (whereas 1 is not committed at all and 5 is very committed). An example of a

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1 Initially we had fewer participants that belonged to the target population ($N = 221$), but we had chosen to continue to hand out the questionnaire to solve this problem.
question about commitment was that participants had to imagine that they would go to a wedding of a good friend that happened to be in the last week of their diet. At this wedding there are a lot of delicious snacks and drinks. How committed would you be to stick to your diet?

The questionnaire was concluded with a question that concerned the actual weight of the participant, namely how satisfied this person is about their own weight with the following 3 possibilities; I want to lose … kilogram, I’m perfect like this or I want to gain …. kilogram.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Current Progress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.5 4.5 5.5 6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>3.5 4.5 5.5 6.5</td>
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Results

The first analysis started off with a two way analysis of variance with goal type and satisfaction as between subject factors, and showed that over all the different conditions (3.5, 4.5, 5.5 and 6.5) range goals did not lead to a significant higher satisfaction than specific goals ($F(7, 381) = 35.830, p > .05, \eta^2_p = .397$). Comparisons were made between the 3.5kg conditions ($M_{Specific} = -.13, SD = 1.84$ vs. $M_{Range} = .25, SD = 1.621; p = .77$), the 4.5kg conditions ($M_{Specific} = 1.67, SD = 1.25$ vs. $M_{Range} = 1.02, SD = 1.36; p = .17$), the 5.5kg conditions $M_{Specific} = 2.45, SD = .64, M_{Range} = 2.08, SD = .51; p = .82$) and between the 6.5kg conditions ($M_{Specific} = 2.43, SD = 1.10, M_{Range} = 2.69, SD = .51; p = .96$)
The second ANOVA measured motivation in the last week of the diet. There was also no significant difference in motivation between range- and specific goals \((F(7, 381) = 6.75, p > .05, \eta^2_p = .110)\). Comparisons between the specific- and range conditions (3.5, 4.5, 5.5, 6.5) were not significant \((p = 1, p = .74, p = 1 \text{ and } p = .99 \text{ respectively})\) and resulted in a mean of 1.81 (SD = 1.32), 2.17 (SD = 1.12), 1.53 (SD = 1.60) and .55 (SD = 1.77) for the specific goals, and a mean of 1.90 (SD = 1.34), 1.68 (SD = 1.20), 1.60 (SD = 1.68) and .76 (SD = 1.88) for the range goals.

The commitment for the diet after the 10 week period also showed no significant results between range- and specific goals \((F(7, 381) = .808, p > .05, \eta^2_p = .015)\).

The eight conditions; goal (specific versus range) \(*\) current position (3.5, 4.5, 5.5, 6.5) had a mean of 1.38 (SD = 1.21), 1.02 (SD = 1.29), 1.33 (SD = 1.35) and 1.55 (SD = 1.10) respectively for the specific goals, and a mean of 1.46 (SD = 1.32), 1.36 (SD = 1.12), 1.48 (SD = 1.38) and 1.51 (SD = 1.31) for the range goals. The comparisons were not significant \((P = 1, p = .9, p = 1 \text{ and } p = 1 \text{ respectively})\).

The questionnaire included a question which measured the diet commitment on a wedding and these results (also for the 3.5, 4.5, 5.5 and 6.5 conditions) were not significant \((F(7, 381) = 1.290, p > .05, \eta^2_p = .023)\). Comparisons were made between the 3.5kg conditions \((M_{\text{Specific}} = -.27, SD = 1.59 \text{ vs. } M_{\text{Range}} = -.56, SD = 1.62; p = .99)\), the 4.5kg conditions \((M_{\text{Specific}} = -.63, SD = 1.72 \text{ vs. } M_{\text{Range}} = -.74, SD = 1.34; p = 1)\), the 5.5kg conditions \(M_{\text{Specific}} = 1.02, SD = 1.52, M_{\text{Range}} = -.71, SD = 1.68; p = .98)\) and between the 6.5kg conditions \((M_{\text{Specific}} = -1.08, SD = 1.48, M_{\text{Range}} = -.82, SD = 1.70; p = .99)\).

The last ANOVA of the questionnaire measured goal commitment \((F(7, 381) = .890, p > .05, \eta^2_p = .016)\). Comparisons were made between the 3.5kg conditions \((M_{\text{Specific}} = 3.81, SD = .74 \text{ vs. } M_{\text{Range}} = 3.64, SD = .72, p = .95)\), the 4.5kg conditions \((M_{\text{Specific}} = 3.82, SD = .82 \text{ vs. } M_{\text{Range}} = 3.78, SD = .84, p = .97)\), the 5.5kg conditions \((M_{\text{Specific}} = 3.84, SD = .83 \text{ vs. } M_{\text{Range}} = 3.80, SD = .84, p = .99)\) and between the 6.5kg conditions \((M_{\text{Specific}} = 3.78, SD = .82 \text{ vs. } M_{\text{Range}} = 3.74, SD = .82, p = .99)\).
The concluding item about commitment revealed no significant result \((p > .05)\). 43.2% of the participants were satisfied about their weight and had no intention to start a diet.

The first ANOVA of the second analysis focused on goal type and satisfaction. It revealed no significant results \((F(7, 245) = 21.458, p > .05, \eta^2_p = .380)\). Comparisons were made between the 3.5kg conditions \((M_{\text{specific}} = -.37, SD = 1.73 \text{ vs. } M_{\text{range}} = .47, SD = 1.74, p = .20)\), the 4.5 kg conditions \((M_{\text{specific}} = 1.61, SD = 1.32 \text{ vs. } M_{\text{range}} = .97, SD = 1.40, p = .47)\), the 5.5kg conditions \((M_{\text{specific}} = 2.43, SD = .73 \text{ vs. } M_{\text{range}} = 2.13, SD = 1.01, p = .98)\) and the 6.5kg conditions \((M_{\text{specific}} = 2.40, SD = 1.30 \text{ vs. } M_{\text{range}} = 2.61, SD = .66, p = 1)\).

Motivation in the last week of the diet was measured in the second ANOVA \((F(7, 245) = 4.976, p > .05, \eta^2_p = .124)\). The eight conditions; goal (specific versus range) * current position \((3.5, 4.5, 5.5, 6.5)\) had a mean of 1.97 \((SD = 1.30)\), 2.12 \((SD = 1.22)\), 1.43 \((SD = 1.65)\) and .53 \((SD = 1.63)\) respectively for the specific goals, and a mean of 1.73 \((SD = 1.51)\), 1.77 \((SD = 1.06)\), 1.47 \((SD = 1.57)\) and .67 \((SD = 1.67)\) for the range goals. The comparisons were not significant \((P = 1, p = .98, p = 1 \text{ and } p = 1 \text{ respectively})\)

Subsequently, the third ANOVA measured the motivation after the period of the diet. Results indicated no significant differences between the specific and range goals \((F(7, 245) = .724, p > .05, \eta^2_p = .020)\). The eight conditions; goal (specific versus range) * current position \((3.5, 4.5, 5.5, 6.5)\) had a mean of 1.57 \((SD = .97)\), .97 \((SD = 1.36)\), 1.17 \((SD = 1.32)\) and 1.47 \((SD = 1.20)\) respectively for the specific goals, and a mean of 1.47 \((SD = 1.31)\), 1.34 \((SD = 1.54)\),
1.110), 1.22 (SD = 1.48) and 1.30 (SD = 1.36) for the range goals. Results of these comparisons were not significant (p > .05).

For the following question participants had to imagine that they were on a wedding with a lot of tempting food. How committed would one be on a day like that? \( F(7, 245) = 1.224, p > .05, \eta^2_p = .034 \). The same conditions as the previous questions (range versus range * 3.5, 4.5, 5.5, 6.5) had a mean of 0.00 (SD = 1.64), -.82 (SD = 1.65), -.83 (SD = 1.46) and - .87 (SD = 1.53) respectively for the specific goals, and a mean of -.73 (SD = 1.51), -.63 (SD = 1.44), -.84 (SD = 1.78) and -1.06 (SD = 1.64) for the range goals. These comparisons were not significant (p = .63 for the 3.5kg conditions and p = 1 for the other conditions).

The last ANOVA contained multiple questions about goal commitment. The overall results were not significant \( F(7, 245) = 1.051, p > .05, \eta^2_p = .029 \). Comparisons between the 3.5kg conditions (M\textsubscript{Specific} = 3.93, SD = .71 vs. M\textsubscript{Range} = 3.62, SD = .74), the 4.5 kg conditions (M\textsubscript{Specific} = 3.83, SD = .66 vs. M\textsubscript{Range} = 3.77, SD = .56), the 5.5kg conditions (M\textsubscript{Specific} = 3.65, SD = .76 vs. M\textsubscript{Range} = 3.61, SD = .87) and the 6.5kg conditions (M\textsubscript{Specific} = 3.59, SD = .53 vs. M\textsubscript{Range} = 3.81, SD = .54) revealed no significant results (p > .05).

The final item of the questionnaire was how the participants thought about their own weight. 91.7% (N = 232) of the participants thought their weight was too high, and 8.3% (N = 21) thought their weight was too low.

Discussion

The first purpose of this study was to test whether range goals lead to more commitment than specific goals in a different scenario than in the study of Scott and Nowlis (2013). The second hypothesis was that low value outcomes would lead to more satisfaction.
in range goals than in specific goals. However, results of the first analysis of study 1 reveal no significant differences in both commitment and satisfaction.

There are two possible explanations for the lack of support for the hypotheses. First, participants in this study had to imagine that they were still on a diet and had one week left to achieve their goal. About one half of the participants (43.2%) in our sample were not even planning on losing some weight. Hence, a second analysis was conducted to solely focus on the target group (women who thought about gaining or losing some weight). Women who thought their weight was perfect might find it difficult to emphasize in an imaginary diet scenario. Despite ruling out these participants, results still offered no support for the hypothesis that range goals evoke more commitment than specific goals. Furthermore, low outcomes did not result in more satisfaction in range goals than in a specific goal setting.

The second possible explanation is that participants in this scenario were 9 weeks on a diet and had 1 week of dieting left to achieve their goal. Research by Scott and Nowlis (2013) found support for their hypothesis when participants looked at a hypothetical predicted outcome. Study 2 took place in a similar scenario in an attempt to replicate and complement (by making a distinction in low and high outcomes, and by taking satisfaction into account) these prior findings.

Study 2

The aim of this study was to present participants a survey in which they had to imagine a different scenario (as opposed to study 1). In this study participants looked at a predicted outcome of a running contest instead of being in the middle of an imaginary scenario. A different scenario might give significant differences in satisfaction and commitment with regard to specific- and range goals. Outcomes of the running contest were also divided into low and high values.
Method

This study had a total of 108 participants in the first analysis (M_{age} = 21.69, SD = 5.05) and 209 participants in the second analysis (M_{age} = 22.02, SD = 4.097). All the subjects volunteered to participate on the campus of Tilburg University. Participants had to imagine that they decided to train for an upcoming running contest for 10 kilometers. The aim was to run the contest in 55 minutes (specific condition) or between 50 and 60 minutes (range condition). Eventually the participants ran the contest in either 53 or 57 minutes (in which they were randomly assigned). Table 2 provides an overview of the different conditions.

Subsequently, Satisfaction (“How satisfied would people be with the result?”) and Motivation (“Next month another contest for 10 kilometers takes place. How motivated would one be to train for this contest?”) were measured with an answering scale from -3 to 3 (-3 was very unsatisfied/unmotivated and 3 was very satisfied/motivated).

Table 2

*Description of the Goal and the Outcome of the Running Contest in Which Participants Were Randomly Assigned to (in Minutes).*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

\footnote{Initially there were fewer participants, but we decided to continue to hand out the questionnaires due to a lack of sufficient statistical power per condition.}
For the first analysis (N = 108) a two way ANOVA with satisfaction and goal type as between subject factors was conducted. The results show that in the specific condition of 57 minutes, participants were significantly less satisfied than the range condition of 57 minutes ($M_{specific} = 4.12$ vs. $M_{range} = 5.43$, $F(3, 104) = 18.561$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2_p = .348$, $d = .73$). In this ANOVA the specific condition of 53 minutes had a mean of 6.70 (SD = .54) and the range condition of 53 minutes had a mean of 6.18 (SD = .67). This comparison was not significant ($p = .46$).

The second question measured motivation and goal type in a two way ANOVA. Participants did not significantly differ in motivation across the conditions ($F(3, 104) = 3.010$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2_p = .080$). The comparisons between the 53 minutes conditions ($M_{Specific} = 5.19$, SD = 1.39 vs. $M_{Range} = 4.86$, SD = 1.76) and the 57 minutes conditions ($M_{Specific} = 6.00$, SD = 1.12 vs. $M_{Range} = 5.54$, SD = 1.43) were both not significant ($p = .84$ and $p = .65$ respectively).

The first two-way ANOVA of the second analysis (N = 209) measured differences in satisfaction between specific and range goals. Participants were significantly less satisfied in the specific condition of 57 minutes in comparison with the range condition of 57 minutes (minutes ($M_{specific} = 4.20$ vs. $M_{range} = 5.15$, $d = .52$; $F(3, 205) = 29.032$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2_p = .298$). The 2 conditions of 53 minutes had a mean of 6.61 and a SD of .57 (specific) and 6.06 and a SD of .98 (range) and the comparison was not significant ($p = .19$).

There were no significant differences in motivation between specific and range goals ($F(3, 205) = 3.823$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2_p = .053$). Comparisons were made between the 53 minutes conditions ($M_{Specific} = 5.18$, SD = 1.35 vs. $M_{Range} = 5.28$, SD = 1.54, $p = .98$) and the 57 minutes conditions ($M_{Specific} = 5.98$, SD = 1.01 vs. $M_{Range} = 5.64$, SD = 1.42, $p = .57$).
Discussion

This study demonstrates that participants, who aimed to run the contest between 50 and 60 minutes (range) and eventually ran the contest in 57 minutes, were significantly more satisfied than participants who had the goal to run the contest in 55 minutes (specific) and ended up with the same result of 55 minutes. There were no significant effects for the hypothetical outcome of 53 minutes. It is interesting to note though that in contrast with results from the study of Scott and Nowlis (2013), no differences in commitment were found between specific- and range goals. Initially there was an average of merely 27 participants per condition \( (d = .73) \) so it was decided to acquire more participants to improve the statistical power. The second analysis had an average of 52 participants per condition \( (d = .52) \).

General Discussion

This research continues the work by Scott and Nowlis (2013), and focused on the influence of goal type on both satisfaction and goal commitment. Subjects were randomized over specific- versus range goals and high- versus low outcomes. They believed that commitment is likely influenced by 2 major factors: (1) perceived attainability of the goal and (2) the perceived challenge of the goal (Latham and Locke 1991). When, for example someone sets a goal of losing 3 kilograms or between 2 and 4 kilograms, the lower end of the range (2 kilograms) is more attainable than 3 kilograms, and the higher end of the range (4 kilograms) is more challenging than 3 kilograms. For this reason they proposed (and found) that range goals lead to more commitment than specific goals. So in order to replicate prior findings by Scott and Nowlis (2013), the suggestion was that range goals lead to more goal commitment because they are more attainable and/or more challenging goals than specific goals.
Furthermore, several studies (Mossholder, 1980; Ivancevich, 1977; Latham & Yukl., 1976) found that subjects in a specific goal setting performed better, but were less satisfied than subjects in the no-goal condition. It was unknown if this effect is still present when specific goals are compared with range goals.

Two studies were conducted to give support for the hypotheses that: (1) range goals lead to higher levels of goal commitment than specific goals and (2) high outcomes lead to less satisfaction in a specific goal setting than in a range goal setting.

In Study 1, subjects had one week of a 10 week period left to achieve their hypothetical goal of losing a certain amount of weight (either 5 kilograms or 4 to 6 kilograms). They were also randomly assigned to 1 of 4 different conditions that represented their current progress towards their goal (3.5, 4.5, 5.5 or 6.5 kilograms). Questions measured satisfaction (how satisfied would you be with this result), motivation (e.g., how motivated would you be to continue with this diet after the 10 week period) and commitment (e.g., it would be hard for me to take this goal seriously). The questionnaire was concluded with a question that concerned the actual weight of the subjects. They had to indicate if they are thinking about losing or gaining some weight (or thought that is was perfect just as it is).

In Study 2 participants had to imagine that they decided to participate in a running contest where they aimed to run 10 kilometers in either 55 minutes (specific condition) or between 50 and 60 minutes (range condition). Eventually they ran the contest in 53 minutes (low outcome) or 57 minutes (high outcome). Questions concerned satisfaction (how satisfied would you be with this result) and motivation (how motivated would you be to train for another contest for 10 kilometers next month).

Results from study 1 however, do not show significant differences in goal commitment between specific- and range goals. This is interesting because Scott and Nowlis (2013) found otherwise. Furthermore, subjects were just as satisfied with the outcome of their
diet with a specific goal as with a range goal. Mossholder (1980) found differences in satisfaction between a specific- and a no-goal condition but the present study showed that this effect was not present between specific- and range goals. We will next examine alternate explanations for the results from study 1.

First, results from the last question (how satisfied are you about your own weight) of the questionnaire revealed that about one half of the subjects were not even planning on losing some weight and this may have influenced the results. We decided to continue handing out the questionnaire to increase the total sample, and focus on the target population (women who thought about losing or gaining some weight) in a second analysis. Focusing on the target population however did not change to results. No differences in satisfaction and commitment were found between specific- and range goals.

Secondly, the change of scenario might account as an alternative explanation for the results. In the study of Scott and Nowlis (2013), participants looked at a hypothetical outcome instead of being in the middle of a hypothetical scenario. Study 2 was conducted to rule this alternative explanation out.

By changing the scenario in the second study we were still unable to replicate the findings of Scott and Nowlis (2013). Subjects did not show more commitment with range goals (as opposed to specific goals). This study however, does offer support for the second hypothesis that high range goals lead to more satisfaction than specific goals. Subjects who ended up running a contest of 10 kilometers in 57 minutes are significantly more satisfied with a range goal (running the contest in 50 to 60 minutes) than with a specific goal (running the contest in 55 minutes). This effect was not present in the 53 minutes conditions.

The first hypothesis was based on the study by Scott and Nowlis (2013) and stated that range goals would result in more commitment than specific goals. That is not what results from the present study indicate. By using two different scenario’s (subjects looked at a
hypothetical outcome and were in the middle towards gaining their goal) and focusing on the
target population, results from this study found no differences in commitment between
specific- and range goals. If goal commitment mainly consists mainly of (1) perceived
attainability and (2) perceived challenge (Latham and Locke 1991), than this study shows that
specific- goals could be just as challenging as range goals.

The second hypothesis contends that high outcomes with specific goals lead to less
satisfaction. According to the Prospect Theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), the goals
people set are perceived as reference points. Outcomes above that point are interpreted as
failures, and outcomes below that point are a success. When you, for instance, aim to run a
contest in less than 55 minutes (specific goal) or between 50 and 60 minutes (range goal), an
outcome of 57 minutes would be above the reference point for subjects with a specific goal
and they would interpret this as a failure. An outcome of 57 minutes would still fall in the
range of running the contest between 50 and 60 minutes so this type of goal would be
interpreted as a success (and thus more satisfaction). So a high outcome could lead to less
satisfaction with a specific goal than with a range goal, because chances are that a high
outcome is above the reference point of the specific goal (failure) while it still falls within the
reference point of the range goal (success).

Moreover, the Prospect Theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) provides a plausible
explanation why this effect was not present in the first study. In the second study people
looked at a certain hypothetical outcome that was either a success or a failure but in study 1,
subjects were in an entirely different hypothetical scenario where they still had one week to
achieve their goal lose the desired amount of weight. When people for example lost 4.5
kilograms and had a specific goal of 5 kilograms, it was not a failure yet so this might be the
reason that subjects were not as unsatisfied as the subjects with a high outcome in the second
study.
However, note that it is still unclear though, how wide the range goal can be before it is seen as less challenging. For example, it is entirely plausible that a specific goal of running 10 kilometers in 55 minutes is far more challenging than a range goal of running the same distance between 40 and 70 minutes.

Second, it could be noted that the progress subjects made in the first study is somewhat ambiguous. For example, if one consumer sets a range goal to lose between 2 and 6 kilograms, and actually loses 3 kilograms, whereas a second consumer sets a specific goal of 4 kilograms and actually loses 3 kilograms, it is not clear whether the first or second consumer would experience more progress (either objectively or subjectively). We made the assumption (by looking at the principles of the Prospect Theory), that subjects experience more progress (and thus, satisfaction) in the range goal condition but we could have tested it to make certain that the subjects actually experienced more progress. A greater managerial awareness of the differences in the type of goal (either specific or range) organizations implement seems to be appropriate.

The results presented here obviously do not provide managers with conclusive evidence that specific goals induce just as much commitment as range goals. No field study using a total of 630 students can. Yet, in 2 different scenario’s, while focusing on the target population, we were not able to replicate the findings of Scott and Nowlis (2013). If commitment consists like Latham and Locke (1991) suggest, mainly by perceived availability and challenge, than the present study demonstrates that specific goals can be perceived just as challenging and available as range goals.

Furthermore, prior research focused mainly on differences in satisfaction between specific- and no goal conditions (Mossholder, 1980; Ivancevich, 1977; Latham & Yukl., 1976). This however, is the first study that demonstrates that the type of goal (specific or range goals) can also influence the corresponding satisfaction of the outcome. This finding
has implications for both public policy and for marketing managers. Whether we look at consumers trying to lose some weight, or major companies setting various targets where millions of euros are at stake, setting the right type of goal benefits all of us. This study contributes to the literature by (contrary to the findings of Scott and Nowlis, 2013), stating that there are no differences in goal commitment between specific and range goals. Chances however, are higher that consumers are more satisfied with outcomes from range goals.
References


goal specificity from goal level. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 43*, 270-287.


