From Close to Distant: The Dynamics of Interpersonal Relationships in Shared Goal Pursuit

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This research examines how individuals' relationship with others sharing the pursuit of the same individual goal may change from early to later stages of the pursuit. In one qualitative field study, one lab study, and a 7-day field experiment, consumers demonstrated a tendency to view others in shared pursuit as "friends" to seek support from and alleviate uncertainties during the early stage of the pursuit; however, once they reached the advanced stage and felt more certain about how to approach and complete the goal, this closeness significantly reduced. This shift in the relationship further influenced consumers' interaction with others, such as the sharing of helpful tips and information. The findings provide insights into the autonomous information-sharing behaviors of consumers in shared goal pursuit and the key drivers behind the effectiveness of shared-pursuit programs (e.g., Weight Watchers, AA).

Ruby, 33, is attending the Weight Watchers meeting that she has recently joined with the goal of losing 30 pounds. (The names are aliases because of the confi-

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dentiality agreement between the researcher and the members of the Weight Watchers program. More details regarding these data are discussed in the study 1 method section.) She has never been thin and has always been prone to weight gain, but it became dramatic in graduate school. She has been struggling to lose the weight since then: "Going into the meetings and hearing other people's stories or telling your own, that's all a part of, you know, I'm doing this, I'm succeeding at this," Ruby said during a break from the Weight Watchers meeting. "The whole collective process helped with my own self-confidence. I talk at a lot [of] the meetings, and so I give my own suggestions for things, or I talk about what was working for me." Ruby feels that fellow attendees of the Weight Watchers meetings are supportive and understanding of her weight loss pursuit, and she thoroughly enjoys hearing their stories, as well as sharing her own. By contrast, Sandra feels that she no longer needs the support of others from Weight Watchers to reach her goal; she feels confident about how to approach this goal and is primarily focused on her own weight loss progress: "I don't talk too much [at the meetings]," Sandra, 52, expressed a completely different feeling about the shared weight loss program. "If I stay, I go in to get weighed mostly and then leave. I have enough confidence that I can do it myself now."

Similar to Ruby, Sandra has struggled with her weight all her life—she has been a yo-yo dieter, alternating between gaining and losing. However, there is one major difference between these two women. Ruby has just begun her weight loss pursuit at Weight Watchers, whereas Sandra has already lost 20 pounds successfully and has only five more pounds to lose to reach the target that she set for herself. Currently, Sandra only attends meetings to be weighed and to be informed of her progress; if she does happen to stay longer at the meeting, she neither interacts with fellow Weight Watchers members nor shares information to help others.

Ruby and Sandra are similar to many of us. We all pursue important life goals; interestingly, we often are not alone in these pursuits, despite the individual nature of most of these goals. Similar to Ruby and Sandra, we may have others around us who are also attempting to lose a few pounds, or we may have a colleague who is also working hard to quit smoking. How then do we perceive and interact with these people who are pursuing the same individual goals as we are?

This article examines how people's relationship with others in the same stage of a shared goal pursuit (i.e., pursuing the same individual goal and at approximately the same stage of pursuit) may change during the course of goal pursuit. We build our research on the literature on interpersonal relationships in self-regulation processes (e.g., Fitzsimons and Finkel 2010) and propose that consumers may not always perceive others in shared pursuit as friends and seek support from them, depending on the progress they have accumulated in the pursuit. Individuals' views of these relationships, in turn, have many important behavioral consequences, including influencing the decision of whether to share helpful goal-related information with others.

The examination of shared goal pursuit processes (i.e., what occurs when people are pursuing the same individual goal) is important for several reasons. From a consumers' perspective, helping others in their pursuit could enhance their own confidence and motivation in the pursuit. On a collective level, the sharing of helpful tips facilitates knowledge exchange and leads to greater joint welfare. From a marketer's perspective, the autonomous information-sharing behaviors between consumers can help generate word of mouth and serve as a free yet credible advertisement to promote products and services (Liu 2006; Phelps et al. 2004). In addition, marketers and government agencies design programs for consumers to accompany one another in pursuing similar individual goals (e.g., Weight Watchers, AA, smoking cessation programs) and create discussion forums for consumers with similar individual goals to exchange goal-related information (e.g., the sharing of discount information on products at http://www.fatwallet.com, diet recipes at http://www.caloriecousnt.about.com, and tips to frequent-flyer reward programs at http://www.flyertalk.com). All these efforts are based on the assumption that such practices would facilitate goal attainment for most people. Therefore, it is important to examine how consumers perceive and interact with others who share the pursuit of the same individual goal.

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN GOAL PURSUIT

Prior research provides important evidence on how interpersonal relationships can influence goal pursuit (for a review, see Fitzsimons and Finkel 2010). For instance, the mere presence of significant partners makes related goals more accessible, triggering the pursuit on an unconscious level (Fitzsimons and Bargh 2003). Interpersonal relationships can also deplete or bolster our self-regulation resources (Ackerman et al. 2009; Knowles, Finkel, and Williams 2007) and provide social support to facilitate such pursuits (Uchino 2006). In addition, it has been found that people assume active roles in managing their interpersonal relationships to ensure successful goal attainment. For example, people automatically bring to mind and become closer to others who can help them advance their goal (i.e., instrumental others) when a goal is made salient (Fitzsimons and Shah 2008) and when significant progress toward a goal has not been made (Fitzsimons and Fishbach 2010).

While the majority of research on interpersonal relationships in the self-regulation literature focuses on the influence of socially close others, such as one's parents, a good friend, or a romantic partner, relatively little research has investigated the influence of others who are pursuing the same individual goals. Observing others as they pursue a goal could remind and activate the same goal in one's association network, consequently leading one to initiate the same pursuit (e.g., the goal contagion effect; Aarts, Gollwitzer, and Hassin 2004). Interestingly, the extent of this contagion effect is proportional to the perceived effort in others' pursuits, such that the more effort others invest in a pursuit, the higher the accessibility of the goal and thus the more motivated one becomes in one's own pursuit (Dik and Aarts 2007). In addition to initiating such a pursuit, one can also vicariously complete a goal by observing others completing the same goal (McCulloch et al. 2011).

However, apart from mimicking others' goal pursuit processes, it is unclear how people actually perceive and interact with others who are in a similar stage of pursuing the same individual goal. In particular, when everyone is attempting to advance on a shared individual goal, how do they treat each other? Are they friendly to one another? Consequently, do they share goal-related information to help one another, or do they keep helpful tips to themselves?

For theoretical clarity, we focus our present inquiry and thus subsequent discussions on people who do not have existing relationships with each other—the only thing they share is the pursuit of the same individual goal (e.g., Weight Watchers members).

OTHERS IN SHARED GOAL PURSUIT

When people pursue the same individual goal (e.g., aiming to lose weight) and are at approximately the same stage of pursuit, they are striving for the same ultimate end state. That is, they are sharing this journey together. What then determines how people would perceive and treat others in

this shared pursuit? This article explores one important determinant of this change: the stage in shared goal pursuit. Based on the dynamics of self-regulation (Fishbach, Zhang, and Koo 2009; Koo and Fishbach 2008) and the findings indicating that people have different concerns as they progress from the initial stage to the advanced stage of goal pursuit (Huang and Zhang 2011; Huang, Zhang, and Broniarczyk 2012), we theorize that individual perceptions of others in shared pursuit depend on the current stage in the pursuit. That is, as people (and their peers with similar levels of progress) move from the initial stage of completing a shared individual goal to the more advanced stage of completing this goal, their perception regarding one another shifts from being friendly to decidedly distant.

More specifically, when people first begin to pursue a goal, they experience considerable uncertainty about the process of the pursuit (Huang and Zhang 2011; Koo and Fishbach 2008): They might be uncertain about how to approach the goal, how to effectively make progress, and what an optimal strategy would be for the pursuit. In other words, people would be uncertain about how their actions and effort would translate into progress and eventually help them reach the goal. One way for people to alleviate such uncertainties is to relate to other people who are also in a similar situation (e.g., Buunk 1995; Hogg et al. 2007)—in this case, pursuing the same goal and facing the same challenges in the pursuit. Knowing that "we are in the same boat" signals that one is not alone and that social support and resources are available when needed.

In reality, this relatedness does not directly make the actual pursuit easier and one may not actually utilize the support or assistance, but knowing that someone similar is out there offers sufficient assurance to alleviate the sense of uncertainty. As a result, in the initial stage of goal pursuit, one tends to view others in the same pursuit as "friends" to alleviate the sense of uncertainty in the pursuit. Take Ruby in the beginning of the article, for example. She just joined the Weight Watchers program and is worried about how she can lose 30 pounds to reach her goal weight. By viewing other customers in the same stage of the program as companions, she experiences a greater sense of certainty in the pursuit about how to approach this goal and eventually attain success.

However, once people accumulate a significant amount of progress on the goal, they become more experienced and feel relatively certain about the process of goal progression. At this point, they no longer need the support from others. Instead, they would focus on reducing the remaining discrepancy to ensure a timely attainment of the goal (Brunstein and Gollwitzer 1996; Carver and Scheier 1998) and mobilize effort based on how much additional work is required (Brehm and Self 1989; Koo and Fishbach 2008; Locke and Latham 2002; Wright and Kirby 2001). As one enjoys the certainty in the goal pursuit process and becomes more focused on one's own progress in the pursuit, it is likely that one would grow more distant from shared-pursuit others. For example, Sandra has lost a significant amount of weight

in the Weight Watchers program and feels relatively certain about the process of successful weight loss. At this time, she is focused on reaching her target weight as soon as possible and no longer seeks companionship from fellow members. As a result, Sandra becomes more distant from other members who are in the same pursuit.

It is important to note that there are many combinations with respect to the stage in a shared goal-pursuit situation between self and other (e.g., self high progress, other low progress, or vice versa). As an initial step in analyzing the relational dynamics between people pursuing the same goal, the present article focuses on the situations in which peers in shared pursuit have achieved a similar level of progress, primarily because these individuals would offer the closest companionship and thus showcase the most drastic change during the course of a shared pursuit.

A key concept in our theorizing is uncertainty in the process of goal pursuit. With this term, we refer to the uncertainty in how one can effectively make progress toward the desirable end state. That is, uncertainty refers to how one's effort would translate into progress and eventually help one attain a goal. We argue that the shift in closeness occurs because of the drop in process uncertainty from initial to advanced stages of goal pursuit. We will directly test this mechanism, showing that as long as consumers remain uncertain about the process of making progress, they stay friendly with shared-pursuit others even in the advanced stages of goal pursuit.

PERCEIVED CLOSENESS AND SHARING OF GOAL-RELATED INFORMATION

The switch from being friends in the initial stage to being distant in the advanced stage of goal pursuit not only manifests itself through people's perceived closeness to others but also has substantial impact on consumers' behaviors in the marketplace, such as the sharing of goal-related information. Abundant evidence shows that when people perceive a person as close, they are more favorable and helpful toward this person (e.g., Byrne and Nelson 1964; Singh and Tan 1992). For example, clerks approve a greater number of loans for applicants who hold attitudes and values that they share (Golightly, Huffman, and Byrne 1972). It follows that if consumers feel close to others in a shared goal pursuit situation, they are more responsive to the requests of others and are more willing to share useful goal-related information with them to help them move forward in their pursuit (e.g., sharing dieting tips with others who are also attempting to lose weight). However, when consumers no longer need the support from others to alleviate uncertainty and focus on their own progress in the pursuit, they should do the opposite—they show greater reluctance to help these peers make further progress on their goals and are less likely to share valuable goal-related information. Therefore, we measured perceived closeness and information-sharing behaviors across different studies to capture how consumers' re-

lationships with shared-pursuit others changed throughout the course of shared goal pursuit.

Specifically, study 1 externally validated our hypothesized patterns through a real-world, large-scale qualitative field study with Weight Watchers. Studies 2 and 3 tested the key driver behind the shift of relationship—certainty in goal pursuit—and thus obtained solutions to help shared-pursuit peers stay friendly throughout the pursuit. Study 2 directly manipulated uncertainty about the goal pursuit process in a reward program, and study 3 manipulated the framing of goal similarity, hence introducing uncertainty in a 7-day walking program.

STUDY 1: A REAL-WORLD VALIDATION WITH WEIGHT WATCHERS

Study 1 provides a qualitative field exploration of perceived closeness in shared goal pursuit in the context of Weight Watchers, the world's largest and best-known commercial weight loss organization (e.g., Heyes 2006; Stinson 2001). According to the company information, approximately 1.3 million customers worldwide attend more than 45,000 Weight Watchers meetings led by 12,000 leaders. In 2011 alone, consumers spent nearly $5 billion on Weight Watchers branded products and services (http://www .weightwatchersinternational.com).

Weight Watchers represents a well-suited marketing context to test our hypotheses for several reasons: (1) All customers, typically strangers to one another before the program, are engaged in the pursuit of the same individual goal—achieving weight loss. (2) Meetings are designed to encourage interactions and relationships among members in the form of active information sharing and in the development of companionship. (3) Meetings also encourage public sharing of the weight loss progress of each member, allowing progress monitoring. (4) Typically, members pursue their weight loss goals over a period of time that is sufficient to enable observation of how the relationship dynamics evolve in the initial versus advanced stage of goal pursuit.

Method

As our purpose was to gauge how Weight Watchers members perceived one another and whether these perceptions affected their information-sharing behaviors depending on the stage of weight loss pursuit, we used a set of qualitative data from an ethnographic study of Weight Watchers that was conducted in three different locations in Lincoln, Nebraska. The study used participant observation across 143 group meetings and long interviews with 51 Weight Watchers customers (see app. A for informant profiles). The findings from the study were published in this journal (Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010).

For our purposes, the data analysis followed the extended case method (Burawoy 1998), which deploys the qualitative data for the goal of extending the bounds of existing theory—to "extend out" from what has been observed and

gained in the field at the micro, individual level to the macro, theoretical level abstraction (Burawoy 1998). The verbatim-transcribed data were entered into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Guided by our theoretical framework on goal pursuit and interpersonal relationship dynamics, we developed a set of close codes, that is, a set of analytic categories that were closely linked to prior theory (Lincoln and Guba 1985). For instance, our coding scheme consisted of companionship and distancing categories as well as behavioral indicators of these theoretical categories such as information sharing (see app. B for the detailed coding scheme). We first used NVivo to identify units of data (passages of text) that belonged to or represented our phenomena of interest (Spiggle 1994). Then we identified core categories of companionship and distancing from the passages and coded conditions that gave rise to changes in interpersonal relationships, perceived closeness, and information-sharing behaviors. We further delineated these categories with more specified perceptions and behavioral indicators, such as reliance on group for emotional support (indicators of companionship) or information withholding (indicators of distancing). During the data analysis process, we moved iteratively back and forth between the data and the categories, known as "constant comparative method" (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to ensure that the emergent representation fully captured the data.

Results and Discussion

We operationalized the stage in goal pursuit based on the percentage of weight loss progress made at the time of interview/observation relative to one's goal weight; those who have achieved less than or equal to 50% of their goal weight were categorized as in their initial stage of the pursuit, whereas those who have achieved more than 50% of their goal weight were categorized as in the advanced stage of the pursuit. Among the 51 interviewees, 18 individuals were in the initial stage of the weight loss pursuit; 19 had achieved more than 50% of their goal weight and were thus categorized as being in the advanced stage of the pursuit; 10 interviewees did not report their progress and 4 were group leaders and thus we excluded these 14 individuals from the analysis.

For the customers in the initial stage of their weight loss pursuit, 100.0% mentioned thoughts related to companionship and stated that they felt closer to and were more willing to assist fellow Weight Watchers members, compared with only 42.1% in the advanced stage of the pursuit: $\chi^2(1, N = 37) = 14.83$, $p < .01$. In contrast, 78.9% of the customers in the advanced stage of weight loss expressed feelings of distancing and reluctance to share information with fellow members, compared with only 44.4% in the initial stage of weight loss: $\chi^2(1, N = 37) = 4.68$, $p < .05$. That is, the customers in the initial stage of the pursuit viewed and treated shared-pursuit members as friends, whereas those in the advanced stage of the pursuit were more distant from them (see fig. 1). We also conducted the same analyses including the 10 members who did not report their progress:

FIGURE 1

THOUGHT PERCENTAGE AS A FUNCTION OF THE STAGE IN THE PURSUIT AND THOUGHT CONTENT (STUDY 1)
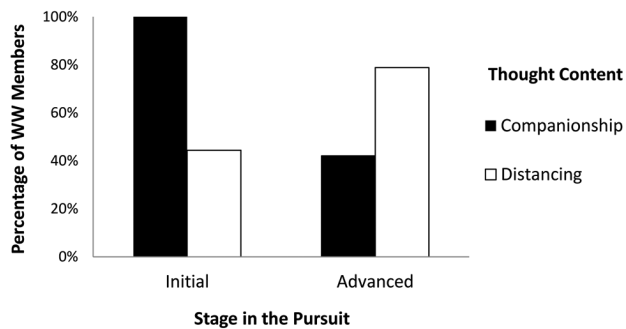
90.0% of them reported companionship thoughts, whereas 60.0% of them reported distancing thoughts. The results remained highly significant for friendly thoughts ($\chi^2(1, N = 47) = 17.91, p < .01$) and was moderately significant for distancing thoughts ($\chi^2(1, N = 47) = 4.67, p < .10$). Below, we provide a few examples of specific quotes from these Weight Watchers members regarding their feelings of companionship in the early stage and distancing in the advanced stage of the shared pursuit.

In the initial stage of goal pursuit, the majority of the informants sought the support of fellow Weight Watchers members to help them navigate the demands of the diet. The informants actively attended group meetings and perceived other Weight Watchers as "friends"; such companionship also appeared to be crucial to enhance the perceived certainty about the goal pursuit process and to eventually attain the weight loss goal.

> Meetings put out good camaraderie. . . . I feel like they're my friends because they're there when I need them, and you know, we visit with each other before the meeting, and you know, especially the ones who're like me, just starting, really struggling, we even sit together, and we commiserate with each other, and I tell them about my week, they say, "oh, my week was worse," and you go, okay, maybe my week was not as bad, so we kinda dust each other off, and we—this—it's good camaraderie. (Anna)

> It [being in a meeting] makes you a little bit more hopeful because you're not the only one in that boat. There's other people that are in the same boat, and they need to go there for the support, for reassurance too. That you know, hey, maybe you gained this week, but next week you'll come and lose. (Julie)

The companionship that manifested itself at the group meetings appeared to be especially reinforced by information sharing—the informants voluntarily exchanged stories about their daily diets and shared information in the form of tips and advice for successful dieting:

> I love sharing; I always say something about "oh, I found this 2 point snack or," you know, I like giving tips, I'm struggling myself, so I wanna help others. . . . I'm learning how to do this [weight loss], and so, like, if I find some good recipe or, like for Thanksgiving, I made this, I made this low-point pumpkin pie, oh, it was delicious, it was just a point for a serving, so I was, I actually typed that up, and I had a bunch of it, so I gave that to the leader, so she was giving it out. . . . I like helping out that way. (Cynthia)

> I just wanted to share . . . you know, how we think Skinny Cow ice cream is 2 points per serving, right? . . . I did calculate, and with sugar, it actually comes out close to 3 points a serving . . . just wanted to put it out there. . . . I'm trying to figure this thing out, like we all do, and people have been helpful, so I wanna do my bit. (Emily, observation note, 5:30 p.m. group meeting)

In contrast, as the informants got closer to reaching their goal weights (i.e., having achieved more than 50% of their weight loss goal), perceptions of fellow Weight Watchers members as "friends in the same boat" receded. These advanced-stage informants felt more certain that they knew how to pursue the goal by themselves and therefore were self-sufficient and no longer needed the support from others:

> I had my downs, there . . . were weeks in there, I lost like quarter of a pound . . . maybe not in one week, but you know, I didn't think I could lose 25 pounds either, which I did, so . . . I think my body is different now, and I know what I gotta do, so I think I'll get there next week and hit lifetime. (Patricia)

> I lost 60 pounds, so I have 10 more to go. . . . I haven't been going to meetings every week, not actually after I lost 50 pounds; I just don't think I need to. I may go once a month, maybe twice, but that hasn't been the case. . . . I already got everything I need to know from the program, so the fact that I lost 10 pounds without going there every week, I mean, it's not like they're my friends or anything; I don't need to see them every week. (Sharon)

This certainty about goal pursuit led to a tendency to reduce interactions with fellow Weight Watchers members and even to withdraw from group meetings. Several informants who were at a more advanced stage of goal pursuit tended to sit in the back rows of the meeting room, remained silent throughout the meeting, and left shortly after the meeting was over. Another manifestation of distancing was ceasing to share information with other Weight Watchers members.

> I'm very close to getting to goal. I share a lot less now; I did all my sharing . . . 'cause you know, I'm kinda at a different place . . . you know, they gotta learn themselves. . . . I just listen [at meetings], sometimes I don't stay, I just go in, get weighed, and leave. (Mary)

> I don't like to talk about it to a lot of people because . . . don't wanna explain to anybody why I'm doing what I'm doing. I just wanna do it for myself. (Sandra)

The analysis of the qualitative data set collected at Weight Watchers provides initial support for how the dynamics of interpersonal relationships change depending on the stage of shared goal pursuit. We observed that the informants in the initial stage of goal pursuit tended to view fellow Weight Watchers members as "friends in the same boat" who were instrumental to alleviating uncertainty in the pursuit. These informants actively sought the company of Weight Watchers friends by attending group meetings, at which they willingly engaged in interactions with others by absorbing and voluntarily sharing helpful diet-related information.

As the informants reached more advanced stage of their goal, the pattern of perceived closeness and helpful behaviors shifted. The informants at these times enjoyed increased feeling of certainty in weight loss and therefore focused on monitoring their goal progress (e.g., attending meetings mainly for weigh-in) and no longer sought companionship from fellow Weight Watchers members. Consequently, these informants distanced themselves by ceasing interactions with other Weight Watchers members; they avoided sharing helpful tips, remained silent at meetings, and even withdrew from attending group meetings altogether. Based on these initial findings, we proceeded with a laboratory study to further examine our hypothesis. In addition, we explore whether such a shift in relationship occurred because of the increased certainty in goal pursuit process at the advanced stage of shared pursuit.

STUDY 2: CERTAINTY ABOUT THE PROCESS OF GOAL PURSUIT

Study 2 served two important purposes. First, we aimed to isolate the effect of merely sharing a pursuit and eliminate the alternative explanation that the proposed pattern resulted from anticipated reciprocation/retaliation (i.e., "if I do/do not help, then others will do the same"); thus, in this study, we paired the participants with phantom partners generated by the computer to ensure that they would not know their partners nor anticipate any future interaction.

The second purpose was to test the underlying role of process certainty in the shift of relations. We posit that as a natural occurrence, certainty about the process of goal pursuit increases in the advanced stage of the pursuit. In this natural condition, we thus expect that people would seek companionship during initial stages to alleviate uncertainty in goal pursuit but become distant when they approach the end of the pursuit and feel relatively certain about the process. To further investigate the uncertainty mechanism, we created another set of conditions that directly reduced certainty by making the connection between one's action and the resulted progress uncertain. We predict that in these uncertainty-manipulated conditions, the sense of uncertainty created by our procedures would help people stay friendly even when they reach the advanced stage of shared pursuit. We measured people's sharing of helpful tips with others as a behavioral evidence for the hypothesized shifts in relationship. In addition, we employed a different consumer context—the sharing of tips in a credit card reward program—to test our hypothesis.

Method

A total of 165 undergraduate students (39.4% males, M_{age} = 22.12 years, SD = 4.26) from Stanford University participated in this study online for monetary compensation. This study used a Stage in the Pursuit (initial vs. advanced) × Certainty about the Process (natural vs. uncertain) between-subject design.

At the beginning of the session, all participants were informed that they would be paired with a student who was taking the study at the same time. In addition, we informed the participants that the computer system setup was designed to ensure that the participants could send messages to help their assigned partners if they desired but that they could not receive any information in return; this approach was chosen to ensure that we could fully attribute the information-sharing behaviors observed to the participants' own willingness to help (and perceived closeness) rather than to their expectation for reciprocation or fear of retaliation.

The cover story informed participants that the researchers were working with the university's financial office to launch a campus credit card in a few months, which came with a reward program tailored for students' needs. For this purpose, we wanted to get their opinions on the program, as they would be the prospective customers once the program is launched. We further explained that the credit card could easily be reloaded online and would be accepted at numerous vending machines as well as 105 participating stores on campus. There would be a $5 activation fee for the card. A unique benefit of this campus credit card is its reward program. Whenever students use this credit card, they earn reward points; if they reach 100 reward points within a quarter, they will receive a school-symbol loyalty reward that is specially made for this program and cannot be purchased elsewhere. Students saw options of these rewards, such as a football jersey and cellphone accessories with a school symbol on them.

After the introduction, we asked participants to report their expenditures on campus thus far in the quarter, to determine their eligibility for the student credit card program, as well as how many points they would earn during that quarter if they decided to join the program. Students were asked to report their expenditures on campus as accurately as possible, as they would be asked to provide receipts or legitimate documentation (e.g., bank statements) for their reported expenditures to load the respective points on the card when the program was officially launched. It is important to note that, because students did not have full information as to the specific participating stores/businesses on campus, they were merely reporting as many on-campus expenditures as they could recall; this allowed us to directly manipulate their progress level in the program. Specifically, we informed participants that, based on the information they provided in the survey and their expenditures on campus thus far, they would have earned either 25 points (initial

stage) or 75 points (advanced stage) with this campus credit card. Therefore, we would load the specified number of points on their card, and they would only need to earn the remaining points (either 75 points or 25 points, depending on the condition) during the rest of the quarter to win their first loyalty reward.

After students understood how much progress they have made and how much remained to be achieved, we manipulated the certainty about the relation between their future actions and progress in the reward program by introducing different rules of point accumulation. In the natural conditions, we told them that whenever they spent $10, they would earn 1 point. For the uncertain conditions, we adopted the practices often used by credit-card companies and told participants that for home improvement and furniture purchases, they would receive 8% of reward point for each dollar spent; for food purchases (including restaurants), they would receive 12% of reward point for each dollar spent; for entertainment and other expenditures (e.g., movie), they would receive 10% for each dollar spent. Because students reported mainly using their cards for food and entertainment purchases on campus, the uncertain conditions did not provide any less benefit than the natural conditions; the main difference lies in the perceived certainty between one's actions (i.e., money spent) and the resulted progress on the goal (i.e., points earned), such that the "percentage by category" reward structure would lead to a higher feeling of uncertainty than a simple "$10 per reward point" structure. We embedded manipulation checks to ensure that the certainty manipulation was successful ("How clear do you feel you are regarding how to earn more points in this reward program?"; "How sure are you about how to earn points in this reward program?" [1 = not clear/sure at all, and 10 = very clear/sure]) among filler questions about the program.

After receiving progress feedback and reading about the rules of point accumulation, participants were asked to write down their expenditure plan to help them achieve the goal. Participants were then given an opportunity to share some of their tips/tricks with their fellow student who was currently taking a similar survey, had about the same amount of reward points, and would also become a card member when the program was launched. Participants could simply retype their own plan and share it with the fellow students or selectively provide part of their plan/tip as reference. We recorded the number of words in their shared plans/tips as a proxy for their willingness to help a shared-pursuit other—the more willing they were to help the other student, the longer and more detailed their shared plans would be.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check. We first conducted a manipulation check and found that the uncertain conditions indeed made participants feel less clear ($M = 6.84$, SD $= 2.21$) and less sure ($M = 6.98$, SD $= 2.20$) about how to make further progress in this pursuit than those in the natural conditions ($M_{clear} = 7.87$, SD $= 1.91$, and $M_{sure} = 7.67$, SD $= 2.01$; $F(1, 161) = 10.12$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .059$ and $F(1, 161) =$

4.43, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .027$, respectively). Also, as expected, those in the advanced stage and natural condition felt the most clear ($M = 8.02$, SD $= 2.08$) and sure ($M = 7.95$, SD $= 1.99$) about how to make progress in this pursuit among all four conditions as indicated by a marginal Stage in the Pursuit × Certainty about the Process interaction ($F(1, 161) = 2.83$, $p < .10$, $\eta_p^2 = .017$ and $F(1, 161) = 2.66$, $p = .105$, $\eta_p^2 = .016$).

Information Sharing. Since 30.3% of participants chose not to share tips/plans with the fellow student at all (i.e., did not type any word in the sharing box), we analyzed the data using a Tobit model with zero (no sharing) as the lower limit. Specifically, we conducted Tobit analyses on the number of words that participants shared, using stage in the pursuit, certainty, and their interaction as predictors. The analysis yielded the hypothesized main effect of stage ($\beta = -21.56$, $t(161) = -8.71$, $p < .01$), such that those in the initial stage shared more tips ($M = 35.40$ words, SD $= 28.88$) than those in the advanced stage ($M = 7.95$ words, SD $= 14.70$). Thus, consistent with study 1, this result supports individuals engaging in friendly behavior at the outset of goal pursuit and distancing as they approach the end of goal pursuit. More importantly, for our test of uncertainty as the underlying mechanism, we observed a Stage in the Pursuit × Certainty about the Process interaction, $\beta = -5.62$, $t(161) = -2.34$, $p < .05$, with no other effects. To further examine this interaction, we then conducted Tobit analyses on shared tips/plans with certainty as the predictor, spotlighting on each stage of goal pursuit (Irwin and Mc-Clelland 2001). The results showed that, for those in the initial stage of the reward program, making them less certain about the connection between their actions and the resulted progress did not produce additional impact ($M_{natural} = 38.72$ words, SD $= 30.41$ vs. $M_{uncertain} = 32.15$ words, SD $= 27.28$; $\beta = 3.29$, $t(161) = 1.05$, NS), potentially because they already felt quite uncertain about the process. However, for those in the advanced stage of the reward program, feeling less certain about the connection between their future actions and the resulted progress made them share significantly more tips with the fellow student ($M = 11.24$ words, SD $= 17.98$) than those in the natural condition ($M = 4.81$ words, SD $= 9.92$; $\beta = -7.85$, $t(161) = -2.19$, $p < .05$). Figure 2 illustrates the results.

The direct manipulation of certainty in this study showed that the perceived certainty about the process of goal pursuit is indeed the underlying mechanism that leads to the change of relationship in shared pursuit, and thus can serve as a valuable intervention to facilitate friendly interactions. Specifically, people in the early stages of goal pursuit who were naturally uncertain about the goal process shared tips with their goal partner, exhibiting friendly behavior. In contrast, people in advanced stages of goal pursuit who were more certain about the goal process were less likely to share tips, exhibiting distancing behavior. However, when people in the advanced stage of shared pursuit were made to experience uncertainty about how their future actions would translate into progress and help them accomplish the goal,

FIGURE 2

NUMBER OF WORDS IN SHARED TIPS AS A FUNCTION OF THE STAGE IN THE PURSUIT AND CERTAINTY ABOUT THE PROCESS (STUDY 2)
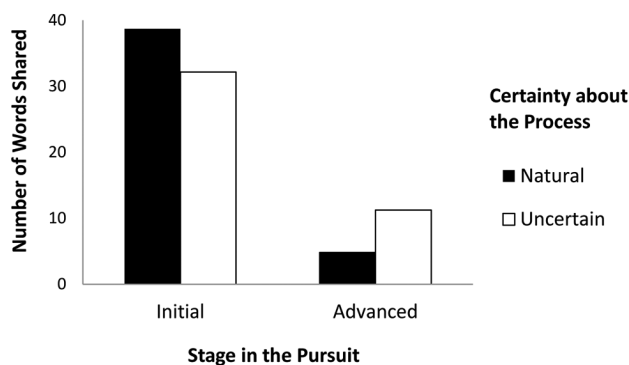
they were more likely to behave like those in the early stages and be friendly with shared-pursuit others.

In our final study, we examine another way that can change the hypothesized pattern—by framing the shared pursuit (and the shared individual goal) as being motivated by different reasons. Drawing from Lamberton, Naylor, and Haws' (2013) finding that seeing others make the same decision based on different reasons could increase the feeling of doubt in one's own choice, we hypothesize that knowing that others share the pursuit for different reasons also introduces uncertainty into the goal-pursuit process. While this uncertainty induced by different reasoning could be detrimental to consumers' confidence in their product choices, based on our theorizing, it could be valuable in helping people remain friendly and helpful with shared-pursuit peers.

STUDY 3: SHARING THE PURSUIT FOR DIFFERENT REASONS

In study 3, participants signed up for a 7-day walking program to achieve the goal of 100,000 steps at the end of the week. Participants wore pedometers to track their progress from day 1 to day 7. We manipulated whether participants were paired with a partner who was participating in the walking program in pursuit of the same goal for either the same (vs. different) reason. We tracked how participants' perceived closeness with their paired partner and how their information-sharing behaviors evolved from days 1, 3, and 5, to day 7. Our theorizing would suggest that participants who shared the pursuit with their partner for the same reason would start out as friends and become distant as they approached the finish line, whereas this trend for those who shared the pursuit for a different reason would be less significant.

Method

Forty-nine undergraduate students (36.7% males, M_{age} = 22.96 years, SD = 6.50) from Stanford University participated in this study for $15 compensation. This study used a Stage in the Pursuit (day 1, day 3, day 5, day 7) × Reason for the Pursuit (same vs. different) mixed design. The stage in the pursuit was a within-subject factor, whereas reason for the pursuit was manipulated between subjects. In addition, we measured participants' own reason for participating in the walking program (health vs. appearance) to ensure that the proposed pattern would occur regardless of one's own reason for pursuing the goal—the key factor that determined one's relationship with a shared-pursuit partner was whether their reasons for pursuing this goal were the same vs. different.

Participants came into the lab on day 1 to sign up for the study and were given a goal of walking for a total of 100,000 steps in the coming week. They answered a short survey about their lifestyles and daily routines and were asked to indicate why they decided to participate in this walking program (i.e., what they were mainly striving for at the end of the program)—either to enhance health (e.g., blood pressure, heart condition, aerobic capacity) or to enhance appearance (e.g., attractiveness, looking fit). We then paired participants with a same-gender partner in the walking program under the cover story that this would mimic the dynamics in regular exercise programs—female participants were told that they were paired with "Mollie," while male participants were paired with "Mike H.," who was about the same age and also a student at the same school. In addition, participants were told that this paired partner joined the walking program either for the same reason as them (e.g., if the participants circled "health," they saw that their paired partner also circled "health") or for a different reason (e.g., if the participant circled "health," they saw that their partner circled "appearance"). A short survey was then presented, asking the participants to report how close they felt they were to this partner on eight 10-point scales (adopted from Berscheid, Snyder, and Omoto 1989; Fitzsimons and Fishbach 2010; Schmitt, Silvia, and Branscombe 2000), such as "I feel that my assigned partner and I have many things in common"; "As a friend, I think I will like my assigned partner"; and "My assigned partner is someone I can see myself being closer to." We created composite closeness scores by averaging the participants' answers to these questions (Cronbach's α = .88).

We then measured participants' stride length and entered this number into their pedometers to complete the set-up for them (so that the number of steps would be captured accurately by the gadget). Each participant received an Ozeri 4 × 3 motion Digital 3D Pedometer and was instructed to wear it around their neck (except for showering and sleeping, as specified by the manual). Participants left the lab with a handout to remind them of the goal, the program, and to look out for follow-up surveys on days 3, 5, and 7.

On days 3, 5, and 7, we sent participants follow-up surveys and asked them to report their current progress (number of

Manipulation check	Same reason (n = 28)		Different reason (n = 29)		t-statistic	p-value
	M	SD	M	SD		
Certainty of the goal process: "How clear do you feel you are regarding how to accumulate more steps to achieve this walking goal?"	6.89	1.99	5.52	2.56	−2.26	.028
Same goal (sharing pursuit): "I feel that I will have the same walking goal (100,000 steps in a week) as my partner."	8.07	1.74	7.86	1.96	−.43	.672
Same reason for the pursuit: "I feel that I will be working on this walking goal for the same reason as my partner."	7.61	1.79	3.72	2.07	−7.56	<.001
Goal importance: "How important is it for you to accumulate 100,000 steps to achieve this walking goal?"	7.29	2.03	7.31	2.22	.04	.965
Goal difficulty: "How difficult do you think it is to accumulate 100,000 steps within a week?"	5.25	2.17	5.83	2.67	.89	.375
Likelihood of attainment: "How likely do you think you can accumulate 100,000 steps within a week?"	4.86	2.42	5.03	2.63	.27	.792
Perceived closeness: Average of eight closeness scales, Cronbach's α = .88	5.38	1.20	5.19	1.24	−.59	.560

steps on the pedometer). The survey then informed participants that their partners reported about the same level of progress as them (5% less than them on day 3, 5% more on day 5, and 5% less on day 7, to ensure the credibility of the feedback). We asked participants to share any tip/trick they picked up during the program with their partner so that their partner could do better. We used the same cover story as study 2 to explain the one-way street of sharing and rule out anticipated reciprocation/retaliation as alternative explanations. We recorded the length of the tips (number of words) participants shared as the behavioral reflection of their relationship at a given point of shared pursuit (days 3, 5, and 7). We also asked participants to report their perceived closeness to this partner on the same scales used on day 1. We calculated participants' perceived closeness scores on days 3, 5, and 7 by creating composite measures for each day (Cronbach's α for day 3 = .97, day 5 = .98, day 7 = .98).

Results and Discussion

Pretest. We first conducted a pretest (n = 57, 33.3% males, M_{age} = 24.07 years, SD = 6.20) to ensure that the manipulation of the reason for the pursuit (same vs. different) indeed changed people's feeling of certainty about the goal pursuit process. Participants in the pretest read about the walking program and were paired with a same-gender partner who was pursuing the same walking goal for either the same (vs. different) reason. They then reported how they felt about the program, including the certainty in the goal pursuit process ("How clear do you feel you are regarding how to accumulate more steps to achieve this walking goal?" [1 = not clear at all, and 10 = very clear]), as well as other aspects about the goal such as perceived importance and perceived closeness on similar 10-point scales.

The results verified that when participants thought that

they joined the walking program for the same reason as their partner, they felt clearer regarding how to make more progress in the walking program (M = 6.89, SD = 1.99) than those who joined the program for different reasons (M = 5.52, SD = 2.56; t(55) = −2.26, p < .05, d = .60). Importantly, manipulating the reason for the pursuit did not change how important the goal was to the participants, how difficult it seemed to complete the goal, the likelihood of attainment, the perceived closeness with the partner, and the feeling that they were pursuing the same walking goal as their partner (i.e., sharing the pursuit); the manipulation only changed whether the perceived reason for the pursuit was the same (M_{same} = 7.61, SD = 1.79 vs. $M_{different}$ = 3.72, SD = 2.07; t(55) = −7.56, p < .01, d = 2.01), hence altering one's feeling of certainty about the process of the pursuit. See table 1 for the details of these scales and pretest results.

Main Study. In the main weeklong study, all participants made steady progress toward the goal from day 1 to day 7, and only one participant reached/exceeded the goal at the end of the program. Excluding this participant did not change the results, so we included this participant for all analyses reported below. We used the dates on which we collected the follow-up data (days 3, 5, and 7) as proxies for their progress level from initial, middle, to advanced stage of the shared pursuit.

We first analyzed the shift in participants' perceived closeness with their paired partner. As participants remained strangers throughout the walking program, the variation in the repeated closeness scores was expectably low in this field experiment (the average closeness score changed from 5.37/10 on day 1 to 4.84/10 on day 7). Nevertheless, we did observe a significant negative trend. Specifically, the repeated ANOVA of perceived closeness on the stage in the

pursuit (days 1, 3, 5, and 7; within-subject), reason for the pursuit (same vs. different), their interaction term, and one's own reason for participating (health vs. appearance) as the covariate, yielded a significant main effect of stage in the pursuit ($F(3, 126) = 4.13$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$), which fitted a significant negative trend ($F(1, 42) = 5.50$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .116$), such that the participants became more distant from their partners as they approached the end of the walking program. We attribute the lack of a significant interaction to the limited variation in this measure in general; participants' information-sharing behavior, on the other hand, constitutes a more diagnostic indicator since it reflects how participants actually viewed and treated their partners, while providing greater variation.

We then analyzed participants' information-sharing behaviors (the length of the tips they shared with their paired partner on days 3, 5, and 7) to gain further insight into how friendly these participants actually were to their paired partners. A repeated ANOVA of the length of the tips on the stage in the pursuit (days 3, 5, and 7; within-subject), reason for the pursuit (same vs. different), their interaction term, and one's own reason for participating (health vs. appearance) as the covariate, yielded the hypothesized effect of stage in the pursuit ($F(2, 84) = 7.53$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .152$), such that participants shared less information as they approached the end of the walking program. More importantly, there was a significant Stage in the Pursuit × Reason for the Pursuit interaction ($F(2, 84) = 5.61$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .118$). There were no other effects in this analysis. Further trend analyses showed that among those who believed that they were participating in the walking program for the same reason as their partner, there was a significant negative trend ($F(1, 21) = 21.02$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .50$), such that as they reached the advanced stage of the program, they shared significantly less information ($M_{\text{day 3}} = 47.83$ words, SD $= 29.73$, $M_{\text{day 5}} = 22.09$ words, SD $= 18.73$, $M_{\text{day 7}} = 19.00$ words, SD $= 19.09$). In contrast, those who believed that they were participating in the walking program for a different reason showed a significant quadratic trend ($F(1, 20) = 7.66$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .277$), such that their helping behavior dropped a little during the middle stage but picked up again as they got close to the goal ($M_{\text{day 3}} = 52.32$ words, SD $= 29.52$, $M_{\text{day 5}} = 38.95$ words, SD $= 32.39$, $M_{\text{day 7}} = 55.00$ words, SD $= 48.34$); the quadratic trend in this condition also ruled out fatigue as a potential reason for the decrease in sharing—those who shared the pursuit for different reasons remained helpful (and typed long tips) throughout the pursuit. Figure 3 illustrates the results.

The results in this study first showed that the shift from being helpful to distancing occurred only when the reason for sharing the pursuit was similar. More importantly, it showed that the negative effect of shared goal pursuit could potentially be contained—when the reasons for pursuing a goal were perceived to be different, people remained helpful throughout the pursuit, even though their objective progress on the goal was already high. It is interesting to note that the certainty here could be two-fold: while one may feel

FIGURE 3

NUMBER OF WORDS IN SHARED TIPS AS A FUNCTION OF THE STAGE IN THE PURSUIT AND REASON FOR THE PURSUIT (STUDY 3)
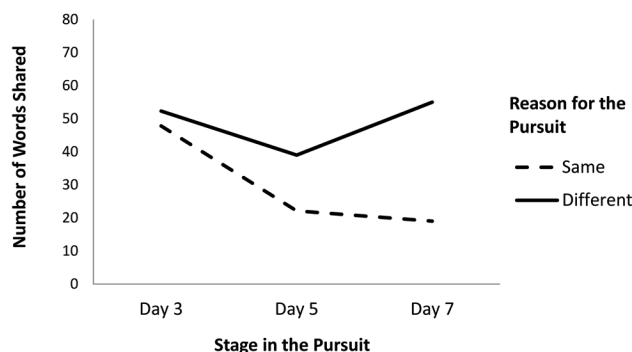
relatively certain about how to make progress in one's own pursuit, one may infer that the partner pursuing the same goal for a different reason may not feel so certain about his or her process and thus may still need help/tips.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Others who are pursuing the same individual goal as we are constitute a unique group in our social network; they are often not our significant others or close friends, but we have one important thing in common—we share the pursuit of the same individual goal. In some situations, this could be the basis for building close companionship, whereas in others, it leads to distancing. In this article, we identified an important factor that would lead to such a shift from being supportive friends to distant strangers: the stage in shared goal pursuit.

The results of three studies across different consumer domains (weight loss, credit card reward program, and walking/exercise program) provided consistent support for the hypothesized dynamics. The large-scale qualitative data set collected from Weight Watchers (study 1) showed that members of the weight loss program treated others in the same program as friends and were more willing to share weight loss tips when they were all in the early stage of the pursuit; conversely, members became distant from others in the program and were reluctant to share information when they were approaching their goal weight. Such changes in perceived closeness and information-sharing behaviors resulted from how certain people felt about the goal pursuit process, as directly captured in study 2. When people reached the advanced stage of goal pursuit and the feeling of uncertainty was alleviated, they were less willing to share information to help shared-pursuit peers; in contrast, when people felt uncertain about how their future actions would lead to progress, they remained friendly and were willing to help shared-pursuit others even when they have already reached

the advanced stage of the pursuit. In study 3, we directly manipulated match in partner's reasons for participating in a 7-day walking program while keeping the walking goal constant and found that when the reason for joining the pursuit was framed as different (vs. the same) and thereby introduced uncertainty, people were able to remain helpful throughout the pursuit instead of becoming more distant when they reached the end of the walking program.

Implications for Self-Regulation Theories

Central to our framework is the unique role that "shared-pursuit peers" (i.e., others who are pursuing the same individual goal and are in the same stage of pursuit) play in the goal pursuit of consumers. We found that consumers manage this relationship differently as they make increasing progress in a pursuit. These findings have important implications for the research on interpersonal relationships in self-regulatory processes (e.g., Fitzsimons and Finkel 2010). Prior research in this domain has focused primarily on how people treat significant and close others in their existing social network (Fitzsimons and Fishbach 2010; Shah 2003; Uchino 2006); the limited research that examined the influence of same-pursuit peers largely depicted an automatic process (Aarts et al. 2004; McCulloch et al. 2011), rather than focusing on one's active, strategic management of the relationship—how one actually perceives and interacts with shared-pursuit peers. Our research suggests that shared-pursuit peers indeed play a unique role in goal pursuit processes compared with other types of social relationships, such that "being in the same boat" helps to reduce the perceived uncertainty in early stages of the pursuit.

Our work also adds to the literature on motivation-based social network categorization. Recent research has shown that motivation could serve as a dimension for people's categorization and knowledge exchange. For instance, recent work on interpersonal regulatory fit proposes that people tend to accept advice from instrumental others who have the same motivation orientation as them (e.g., Risotto, Finkenauer, and Rusbult 2011). In addition, the literature on the goal-oriented management of interpersonal relationships shows that others' instrumentality to one's pursuit of an important goal could constitute a dimension for the categorization of one's social network (Fitzsimons and Shah 2008). Our theory adds to these findings by showing that being motivated by the same individual goal has significant implications for one's perceived relationship with other people and, consequently, one's interaction with them; the examination of such dynamics (i.e., determining when one treats shared-pursuit peers as friends versus not) thus further adds to the dialogue between the fields of motivation and network categorization in the social domain.

Importantly, this work echoes the increasing interest in exploring shared goal pursuit decisions (e.g., Dzhogleva and Lamberton 2014; Lowe and Haws 2014). In this stream of work, researchers examined how individual factors (e.g., self-control tendency) could influence one's self-control decisions in pairs, as well as the downstream effects of joint decisions (e.g., coindulgence and coabstinence) on their relationship. Our work adds a longitudinal perspective to these findings and suggests that how people manage the relationship in shared pursuit could change from one stage to another. In addition, our findings speak to the value of studying shared-pursuit relationships by directly capturing an important behavioral reflection of the shift of such relationship—consumers' willingness and reluctance to share helpful information with shared-pursuit peers.

Along this line, the present work also has specific relevance for the research on the dynamics of self-regulation processes (Fishbach et al. 2009; Koo and Fishbach 2008) and the findings that people have different concerns as they accumulate more progress in goal pursuit (Louro, Pieters, and Zeelenberg 2007). Specifically, our findings expand prior research on motivational dynamics to the social domain. We propose that, in addition to being motivated by different types of feedback and mental representations as separate individuals, people also interact differently with others who are pursuing the same end point as they move from one stage to another in the pursuit. In particular, we identified that the feeling of certainty about the process of goal pursuit determined whether one feels the need for social support, and thus how one treats shared-pursuit others (e.g., study 2). These findings of the dynamics in the social domain are just as important as the self-regulatory dynamics at the individual level because they contribute to the understanding of whether and when people interact with shared-pursuit peers in a collaborative manner, how their commitment to goal-oriented social gatherings evolves during the course of pursuit, and the changes in their interaction with others, as validated in our Weight Watchers data in study 1.

Discussion and Future Research

As stated at the beginning of the article, the topic under examination here is the relationship dynamic that transpires when people share the pursuit of the same "individual" goals, and we documented their tendency to distance from shared-pursuit others as they progress along the goal, even though the shared goals examined here are decidedly non-zero-sum games (e.g., everyone in Weight Watchers could lose 10 pounds). In a way, individuals turned from being friendly early on to being unhelpful, acting as if the pursuit were zero-sum in nature. This raises an interesting question: Who tends to see shared goal pursuits as contests? Crocker and Canevello (2008) have identified an individual difference factor of zero-sum belief to capture the extent to which individuals tend to view others through a competitive lens. It is possible that high zero-sum belief individuals are especially likely to regard shared-pursuit peers as opponents they would like to surpass when the end goal is near (i.e., at the advanced stage of pursuit) and thus especially likely to distance themselves.

An exploratory study offers support for the moderating role of the zero-sum belief individual difference variable. The study followed the procedures in study 2 to pair participants ($n = 129$) who were working in two separate lab

rooms. Participants completed a shopping task where they visited shopping websites and could earn points by identifying "good online deals." If they earned 500 shopper points at the end of the shopping task, they would receive $30 Amazon gift cards. We provided participants different progress feedback to manipulate the stage of goal pursuit (1/5 vs. 4/5 of the progress bar filled) as well as the paired partner's progress. We measured their perceived closeness with the partner before the task, as well as after the progress feedback. In addition, we measured their zero-sum belief (Cronbach's α = .69; Crocker and Canevello 2008) to gauge how likely they were to see the shared goal pursuit as a contest.

The analysis on the shift of closeness (before the task vs. after progress feedback) showed a stronger distancing effect for those in the advanced stage (shift of closeness score: M = −1.02, SD = 1.16), compared with the initial stage (M = −.58, SD = .81) of the pursuit ($t(127)$ = 2.47, p = .015, d = −.44), replicating the findings in prior studies. Importantly, we followed the floodlight analysis procedures (Johnson-Neyman technique; Johnson and Neyman 1936; Spiller et al. 2013) to identify the range(s) of zero-sum belief for which the simple effect of the stage in the pursuit became significant. We found that the effect of stage in the pursuit on the shift of closeness score was only significant for participants whose zero-sum belief was higher than 4.79 on 10-point scales (B_{JN} = −.18, SE = .09, p = .05) but not for those who held a zero-sum belief lower than 4.79. These initial results suggest that the zero-sum game mentality indeed plays a vital role in shared goal pursuit even though these pursuits are decidedly noncompetitive, constituting an interesting and important topic for future research.

Going forward, the present findings further raise many intriguing questions: What are other conditions that determine whether one sees shared-pursuit others as companions? Is it possible that people remain friendly to others who share a diverse set of similarities with them (e.g., a classmate who is taking the same class and pursuing the same dieting goal) but choose to become distant from others who share only one dimension of goal-related similarity with them (e.g., a Weight Watchers member who is pursuing the same dieting goal)? What happens if the relationship is already strong to begin with (e.g., joining an exercise program with a close friend)? Will this extra layer of closeness prevent them from becoming distant, or will it conversely make the change of relationship more drastic at the advanced stage of the pursuit? As discussed earlier, there are many types of combinations with respect to the stage in a shared goal-pursuit situation—would consumers who have achieved advanced stage in the pursuit become aloof from others in the same advanced stage but remain friendly to those who have just begun the pursuit? The present research represents an important first step in exploring the social component of shared goal pursuit and ushers in a whole set of exciting and important research questions for future exploration.

Implications for Marketing Practitioners

The present research has important implications for marketers who aim to enhance consumer involvement in shared goal pursuit processes such as Weight Watchers, AA, smoking cessation programs, and shared-pursuit forums that aim to facilitate the attainment of a challenging goal. Our findings suggest that as consumers make more progress in their own goal pursuit, they may find the relationship with shared-pursuit peers inhibitive rather than facilitative and may become more distant from fellow members. This change of relationship may lead to withdrawal from the program and even to eventual failure in one's goal attainment. Therefore, it might be advisable for shared goal-pursuit programs to maintain a level of uncertainty of the goal pursuit process until a person actually succeeds, such that consumers would remain in the group for a longer period of time and continue interacting with other members in a positive manner. On the other hand, it is also beneficial for shared goal-pursuit programs to implement procedures to strengthen the feeling of companionship. For instance, shared goal-pursuit programs could leverage group identity as a way to unite members and minimize distancing. Furthermore, by emphasizing individual differences in the unique reasons that drive each member to join the pursuit, the unique struggles that each member encounters, and the unique benefits that each member receives when attaining the goal as well as providing progress feedback based on different measures/scales accordingly, marketers can effectively elevate uncertainty in the pursuit of the shared goal and thus help the members remain friendly with one another throughout the program.

Finally, the present research also sheds important light on how marketers can better motivate consumers to share goal-related information with one another, such as nutrition and exercise information (for a fitness goal) and tips on earning reward points (for a loyalty program goal). It is not news that word of mouth serves as a free and powerful advertisement for marketers. For instance, Phelps et al. (2004) have found that among all emails that are forwarded, 45.5% consist of information and helpful tips, and as many as 20% of the emails discuss companies or products in positive ways. Recent findings also point to important factors that would enhance or inhibit the generation of word-of-mouth as well as affect the content of sharing (e.g., Chen and Berger 2013). By strategically managing how consumers perceive their status in goal pursuit, marketers can effectively facilitate positive interaction among customers working on the same goal, such as encouraging voluntary sharing of goal-related information (e.g., new dieting products and exercise programs).

DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The first author conducted the data collection for studies 2 and 3 in spring 2014, with assistance from the Stanford Behavioral Lab (special thanks to the associate director, Nicholas Hall, and research assistants Anna Katherine

Barker and Christine Hart). The second and third authors acted as confidantes throughout the process. The fourth au-

thor conducted the data collection for study 1. These data were analyzed and discussed jointly by all four authors.

APPENDIX A

INFORMANT PROFILE TABLE (STUDY 1)

Pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Education	Occupation	Weight Watchers status
Abby	58	Married	High school	Day care operator	Regular member
Amy	36	Single	Bachelors	Graduate student	Regular member
Angela	25	Married	Masters	Graduate student	Regular member
Anna	53	Married	Some college	Secretary	Regular member
Ava	64	Married	High school	Bookkeeper	Regular member
Barbara	35	Married	Bachelors	Nurse	Regular member
Betty	53	Married	Doctorate	Psychotherapist	Regular member
Brenda	44	Married	Bachelors	Volunteer coordinator	Regular member
Carol	51	Single	Bachelors	Entrepreneur	Regular member
Claudia	30	Married	Masters	High school teacher	Regular member
Cynthia	40	Divorced	Bachelors	Consultant	Regular member
Debra	53	Single	Some college	Technician	Regular member
Donna	32	Married	Some college	Banker	Regular member
Doris	44	Married	Bachelors	Nurse	Regular member
Elizabeth	23	Single	Some college	Training specialist	Regular member
Ethel	54	Married	Bachelors	Girl Scouts coordinator	Regular member
Helen	47	Divorced	Masters	Research tech	Regular member
Irene	25	Single	Bachelors	Cafeteria manager	Regular member
Jane	52	Married	Bachelors	Office manager	Regular member
Janet	28	Single	Bachelors	State investigator	Regular member
Jennifer	45	Single	Bachelors	Administrative assistant	Regular member
Jessica	60	Married	High school	State employee	Regular member
Joyce	38	Engaged	Masters	Recruitment director	Regular member
Judith	30	Single	Masters	Graduate student	Regular member
Julie	46	Married	Some college	Sales associate	Regular member
Karen	26	Partnership	Masters	Research assistant	Regular member
Kathleen	56	Single	Masters	Executive director	Regular member
Kelly	50	Married	Some college	Store manager	Regular member
Kimberly	46	Married	Masters	High school teacher	Lifetime member
Leslie	60	Divorced	Masters	Secretary	Lifetime member
Linda	50	Married	Bachelors	Secretary	Lifetime member
Lorraine	49	Married	Bachelors	High school teacher	Lifetime member
Mary	50	Married	Bachelors	Coordinator	Lifetime member
Melanie	37	Married	Bachelors	Paraeducator	Lifetime member
Michelle	53	Married	Bachelors	Social worker	Lifetime member
Nancy	50	Married	Bachelors	Nurse	Lifetime member
Natalie	33	Married	Bachelors	Administrative support	Lifetime member
Patricia	44	Married	Bachelors	Archeologist	Lifetime member
Rebecca	50	Married	Bachelors	State employee	Lifetime member
Ruby	33	Married	Doctorate	Assistant professor	Lifetime member
Ruth	24	Single	Masters	Graduate student	Lifetime member
Samantha	59	Widowed	Some college	Social worker	Lifetime member
Sandra	52	Married	Masters	Publicist	Lifetime member
Sara	46	Married	Some college	Unemployed	Lifetime member
Sharon	31	Single	Masters	Research chemist	Lifetime member
Shirley	59	Married	Some college	Secretary	Lifetime member
Susan	30	Single	Masters	High school teacher	Lifetime member

APPENDIX B

DATA CODING SCHEME (STUDY 1)

Theme and description

Indicators of companionship

- Community of like-minded others:
  Perception that Weight Watchers members are similar to one another, united by the commonality of weight loss challenges and experiences.
- Goal pursuit as a shared project:
  Perception that individual weight loss goals are subsumed into a shared goal pursuit.
- Increased perception of certainty in goal pursuit:
  Perception that the presence of the group enhances certainty in individual weight loss goal pursuit.
- Companionship seeking:
  Frequency of contact with fellow Weight Watchers and group leaders by regular attendance at group meetings on a weekly or more than a weekly basis.
- Motivation to contribute to a shared goal pursuit:
  Desire to score a weekly weight loss to avoid disappointing the group.
- Reliance on the group for emotional support:
  Mutual seeking and sharing of verbal encouragement and supportive communications from fellow Weight Watchers, especially in times of dietary challenges/setbacks.
- Reliance on the group for informational support:
  Mutual seeking and sharing of tips, advice, and diet-related information with fellow Weight Watchers at the group meetings.

Indicators of distancing

- Increased sense of individual distinction:
  Perception that after having lost weight, an individual member is now different from other Weight Watchers.
- Goal pursuit as an individual project:
  Desire to lose weight independently, with limited or no participation in Weight Watchers group meetings.
- Absence of uncertainty in goal pursuit:
  Perception that an individual member is certain about how to attain the weight loss goal without reliance on the group.
- Companionship aversion:
  Reducing contact with fellow Weight Watchers by infrequently attending or skipping group meetings.
- Distancing from a shared goal pursuit:
  Perception that everyone must pursue their own weight loss goals.
- Limited/no need for emotional support:
  Tendency not to disclose temporary setbacks and limited or no seeking/sharing of verbal encouragement and supportive communications.
- Information withholding/limited sharing:
  Tendency not to seek or share diet-related information with fellow Weight Watchers.

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