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Do objects fuel thyself? The relationship between objects and self-regulation

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It has long been argued that people become attached to objects because objects help people to define, reflect, and communicate the self. In this article we consider whether objects not only help to 'know thyself' but also to 'fuel thyself'. In other words, whether objects can contribute to self-regulation. We review past research to consider whether the functional and symbolic aspects of objects are found to promote self-regulation through enhanced recognition of and commitment to standards, monitoring, and capacity to change. We conclude by considering that people need to regulate their relationship with objects, in part because objects can successfully help people achieve basic needs. In this way, failure to regulate one's relationship to objects can contribute to problematic outcomes such as neglect, obesity, hoarding, and addiction.

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Why do people adorn their bodies, homes, and offices with objects? One prominent answer has been that 'I am what I have' [1••, page 160]. In other words, possessions help people to develop, define, and communicate who they are [1••,2,3]. While this answer is not incorrect, might it be incomplete?

It is unlikely that people have self-concepts merely for the purpose of defining and contemplating themselves. Instead, the self-concept helps people to obtain desired outcomes in an ever-changing environment, such as relationship partners, career success, and meaning in life. In this way, perhaps an overlooked answer to the opening question is that people desire and become attached to objects because objects help them to achieve important but difficult outcomes through the promotion of self-regulation. From this perspective, the degree to which a person feels connected to an object may in part reflect that object's previous success in facilitating goal pursuit. The corollary is that when objects are extremely effective at helping people attain desired states, then people may fail to effectively manage their relationship with those objects (e.g. materialism, addiction, hoarding), a topic we shall return to near the end of this paper.

Many objects are expressly designed to help people achieve difficult but desirable goals. Alarm clocks and Antabuse (a drug that will cause a person to become violently ill if alcohol is consumed) are both functional objects that help people combat short-term temptations (e.g. sleeping in or drinking alcohol) to adhere to long-term goals (e.g. getting to work on time or staying sober). In addition to their functional value, however, objects have symbolic value. People, religions, and societies imbue all manner of objects with meaning, and objects that are functionally worthless can become symbolically meaningful when they become associated with their surrounding circumstances (e.g. mementos, trophies).

In this paper, we consider how objects can impact the three main components of self-regulation: standards, monitoring of the self, and capacity to change [4••]. Self-regulation can be facilitated by either the symbolic or the functional aspects of objects.[3]

By way of definitions, self-regulation refers to the dynamic process of determining an end state and taking action to achieve that desired end state while monitoring progress along the way [5••]. A key element of self-regulation is the alteration of one's thoughts, feelings, or actions, often in the form of overriding one response and replacing it with a less common but more desired response (i.e. exerting self-control [4••]). By object attachment, we mean a psychological feeling that individuals experience toward a digital or physical good that is inanimate but can be infused with human or godlike qualities.

Standards

People do not attempt to change themselves at random. Instead, they strive to change themselves to meet desired

[3] A quick and broad PsycInfo search suggests that the relationship between self-regulation and objects is understudied in comparison to the study of the relationship between the self-concept (not including self-regulation) and objects (352 versus 3028 hits).

standards, which include ideals, goals, values, and expectations. Clear standards can facilitate self-regulation, whereas vague, ambiguous, or conflicting standards can contribute to self-regulatory breakdown [6].

Due to the associative nature of the mind and the symbolic nature of objects, objects may become powerful representations of important standards, which in turn contribute to effective self-regulation. More specifically, objects may help people to recall desired outcomes, especially when times are tough and hence self-regulatory breakdown becomes more likely.

The conjecture that objects can activate important standards is rooted in research which suggests that objects can become cognitively associated with a goal when an object is present during goal attainment [7–9]. Once an object becomes associated with a higher-order goal, the object can activate that goal when the object is perceived either consciously or unconsciously [10•]. The object — standard activation link may be particularly important when people are tempted to engage in behaviors that are pleasurable in the moment but conflict with higher-order goals. An office worker, tempted to blow off a looming deadline because of fatigue, boredom, or an alluring happy hour, can look at a family picture strategically placed on the desk, remember the need to work hard, and persevere despite tempting alternatives.

Provocative evidence for the notion that objects can help people to stick to their higher-order goals in the face of temptation through the activation of higher-order standards comes from research on religion and self-regulation. Religion improves self-regulation [11,12], particularly among those who have fully internalized their religion's standards [13]. Moreover, religions almost always (if not always) endow non-functional objects with symbolic meaning. Perhaps religion promotes self-regulation in part through its symbolic objects which are laden with normative associations. Religious symbols remind people of divine commandments, spiritual ideals, and other standards.

Fishbach *et al.* [10•] provide evidence that religious stimuli can promote processes that facilitate self-regulation. More specifically, those researchers found that priming undergraduate students with temptation/sin-related concepts (e.g. sex) compared to neutral concepts (e.g. talk) led to faster recognition of religion-relevant stimuli (e.g. bible). The implication is that, through repeated instances of suppressing temptations in the presence of religious objects, exposure to the temptations automatically led to the recruitment of religious concepts. This in turn was expected to help people eschew the temptation (e.g. premarital sex) in favor of the 'higher road' (adherence to religious standards). Conversely, priming religious stimuli (e.g. bible) as compared to priming neutral stimuli (e.g. talk) led to slower recognition of temptation/sin-relevant words (e.g. drugs). Hence, even when people were not aware that they were viewing religious stimuli, thoughts about religious objects suppressed the detection of conflicting standards. Taken together, these results suggest that religious objects may help self-regulation by promoting cherished standards and inhibiting conflicting temptations.

Monitoring

In addition to clear standards, effective self-regulation requires that people understand where they are in relation to their standards [4••]. It is difficult for people to lose weight or save money if they do not know their weight or financial accounts, respectively. Improving monitoring can improve self-regulation [5••], and digital or physical objects may help people track their goal progress by enabling a precise comparison to a precise standard (e.g. exact weight, savings balance).

Parents, teachers, and even clinicians seem to know this well, as evidenced by the popularity of star (or sticker) charts for children. For every desired behavior the child performs (e.g. finish homework), the child receives a star. Once children know how many stars they can earn on a given day (the standard), they can simply look at the chart and know if they are meeting the standard for the day (monitoring). This encourages self-regulation because falling short of the standard prompts people to change their behavior so as to reach the desired standard [5••]. Indeed, a review concluded that sticker charts help children with chronic diseases adhere to treatment protocols [14].

Among adults, there is also evidence that a symbolic object can improve monetary saving, a personally and societally important behavior which requires self-control [15]. The study, which was conducted across six months with chronically poor laborers in Kenya, aimed to determine which behavioral interventions are the most effective for promoting saving among people with low, sporadic income [16•]. As compared to social incentives (e.g. receiving a message from one's child to save for the child's future) or financial incentives (i.e. financial matching of 10% or 20%), the most effective intervention was giving participants a symbolic object which facilitated monitoring. More specifically, participants who received a golden-colored coin (with numbers for each week that could be scratched off when the savings goal was met) saved two times more than participants in the other conditions. By providing a symbolic representation of one's precise goal progress, the functionally useless golden-colored coin facilitated self-control.

Indeed, it is not hard to think of mainstream products which are designed to monitor and convey people's exact goal progress. Fitbits and other similar devices promote

goal attainment because they enable people to know precisely where they are in relation to their goal.

Capacity to change

Even if people recall and commit to standards, and even if they monitor their behavior, people can still fail at self-regulation because they do not change their thoughts, feelings or behavior. For example, people can know their saving goals, they can monitor their financial habits, but they can nevertheless blow their budget by spending money on products they do not need because they fail to override their impulse to buy yet another product . There is some evidence to suggest that the symbolic nature of objects may encourage people's capacity to change through affect regulation, restoration of feelings of control, and transcendence.

Meaningful objects can bolster people's ability to cope with emotionally trying circumstances. In one study, participants were asked to give a speech about their death [17]. Christian (but not non-Christian) participants who were shown religious (Christian) symbols displayed a more adaptive cardiovascular response during the speech. The implication is that the symbolic meaning of religious imagery helped Christians regulate their emotional responses while giving a speech laden with existential threat.

In addition, the positivity that comes from some objects may help to fuel people's capacity to change. For example, an experience sampling study conducted over the course of a week showed that simple pleasures, which are often but not exclusively centered around objects (e.g. buying new workout pants, playing a game on the iPhone, looking at art in a Museum), promoted daily goal progress [18]. More specifically, the authors found that simple pleasures facilitated goal pursuit by offsetting the deleterious consequences of small annoyances. The implication is that objects may help people to self-regulate effectively when the objects infuse people with positive affect, especially when the daily hassles of life get people down.

In addition to affect regulation, objects may bolster self-regulation by restoring lost feelings of control. When people do not feel in control, they show signs of reduced self-regulation, such as lower persistence at unsolvable tasks or a reduced willingness to withstand painful experiences [19–21]. However, when people's feelings of control are threatened, they seek out objects which can help them to re-establish personal control [3,22,23]. Notably, people feeling low in control gravitate toward products that can improve their performance alongside their own effort (e.g. a golf club that improves performance alongside diligent practice and effort) rather than objects which do the work for them (e.g. a golf club that improves putting with limited practice or effort [22]). This suggests that when people wish to re-establish control, they seek objects which serve as symbolic 'helpers' rather than functional 'heroes'. With perceptions of control restored, people can more effectively self-regulate.

Finally, the symbolic nature of objects may help people self-regulate through transcendence, where transcendence refers to the capacity to process and respond to things that exist beyond the immediate environment. A great deal of self-regulation may depend on transcendence [4••], and a great deal of successful self-regulation 'myths' involve the individual transcending his/her personal deficiencies or impoverished environment to become successful. Because objects are vessels which transport people to geographical, emotional, situational, and temporal circumstances beyond the present environment, objects may help people transcend challenging times and give them the strength to go on. Hemingway, for example, rubbed a rabbit's foot that he kept in his pocket when he was starving, cold, and unsure of his future. It helped to transport him from Paris to the settings of his novels in the countryside of Spain. Being able to imagine the place and characters in vivid detail enabled Hemingway to write novels that led him to become the preeminent writer of his time. This is only one example of an object helping a person transcend immediate challenges to carve out a successful future.

Regulating relationships to objects

Our focus on how objects contribute to self-regulation could be complemented by research on how people regulate their relationships to objects. Indeed, much of self-regulation involves trying to change one's relationship to objects, such as trying restrict consumption of fattening foods and cigarettes, trying to save money, and trying to be more diligent at practicing piano. Regulation might involve improving the relationship (e.g. taking better care of one's car) or downgrading it (e.g. not spending so much time on smartphone), and effective regulation may occur when people dampen their positive feelings toward a tempting object [24•]. Notably, failure at either end can lead to problematic outcomes for the individual and society.

Conclusion

We opened with the question of why objects are so important for the self. For decades, the answer has been because objects help people to know themselves. Based on this initial review, another answer may be that objects can fuel the self. By activating standards, monitoring performance, and fueling the capacity for change, objects may promote self-regulation.

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Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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People use self-regulation to manage their relationship with objects. Dampening people's relationship with a desired object (in this case, reducing people's perceived desire for an object), improved self-regulation.