

“I Don’t” versus “I Can’t”:
When Empowered Refusal Motivates Goal-Directed Behavior

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This research is based on the insight that the language we use to describe our choices serves as a feedback mechanism that either enhances or impedes our goal-directed behavior. Specifically, we investigate the influence of a linguistic element of self-talk, in which a refusal may be framed as “I don’t” (vs. “I can’t”), on resisting temptation and motivating goal-directed behavior. We present a set of four studies to demonstrate the efficacy of the “don’t” (vs. “can’t”) framing (studies 1-3) when the source of the goal is internal (vs. external; studies 2a and 2b), as well as the mediating role of psychological empowerment (studies 1, 2a, and 2b). We demonstrate this novel and effective refusal strategy with actual choice (study 1) and with behavioral intent (studies 2a and 2b) and also illustrate its applicability in the real world in a longitudinal intervention-based field study (study 3).

One can have no smaller or greater mastery than mastery of oneself.

- Leonardo da Vinci

A powerful agent is the right word. Whenever we come upon one of those intensely right words...the resulting effect is physical as well as spiritual, and electrically prompt.

- Mark Twain (quoted by William Dean Howell in "My Mark Twain")

Being able to effectively say “no” to temptation is a critical skill required for consumer health and well-being. Distractions and temptations often sway consumers away from the goals they desire to achieve, and consequently much extant research has been devoted to identifying factors that enable consumers to resist temptation and pursue their long-term goals. Previous research has implicated a whole host of social, psychological, and individual difference factors that influence responses to temptations and distractions. For instance, the consumer’s mood (Labroo and Patrick 2009), the appearance of others (McFerran et al. 2010), the presentation of the tempting item (Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999), the consumer’s level of chronic impulsivity (Rook and Fisher 1995) and mortality salience (Ferraro, Shiv, and Bettman 2005) have all been shown to influence resistance to temptation. To our knowledge, however, the current research is the first that investigates a linguistic element of self-talk (a conversation with oneself) in terms of the impact that the actual words consumers use to frame their refusal has on resisting temptation and motivating goal-directed behavior. Further, since our self-talk influences the mental representation of our choices (Senay, Albarracin, and Noguchi 2010), we argue that a refusal framed to connote a sense of empowerment and control is likely to be effective in self-regulation. The scope and boundaries of this effect are the focus of the current research.

Imagine, for instance, that Jane and Jackie are both on a diet and have similar weight loss goals. Every time Jane sees something sinful, such as chocolate cake, she says “I *don’t* eat chocolate cake.” However, when Jackie sees chocolate cake, she says “I *can’t* eat chocolate cake.” Although individuals use the words “don’t” and “can’t” somewhat interchangeably in such contexts, we propose that their effects might not be interchangeable but may in fact work in very different ways. We posit that the words “don’t” versus “can’t” are representative of two distinct types of refusal that differ in terms of what they implicitly connote about the consumers’ commitment and attitude towards their goals. Relying on prior research on linguistic framing (Cheema and Patrick 2008; Hoegg and Alba 2007; Mayer and Tormala 2010), self-talk (Senay et al. 2010), and motivated goal pursuit (Deci and Ryan 2000), we propose that the actual language consumers use to frame a refusal serves as a feedback mechanism that signals to themselves either a sense of empowerment and control or a lack thereof, thus influencing the effectiveness with which they pursue their goals. Specifically, in the current research we hypothesize and empirically demonstrate that framing a refusal using “I don’t” is more psychologically empowering than using “I can’t” and can motivate goal pursuit.

With this research we make a few key contributions. First, we examine the role of a linguistic element in motivated goal pursuit. In their review of the psychology of language use, Pennebaker, Mehl, and Niederhoffer (2003) emphasize the importance of investigating language use, specific words in particular, on individual decision-making, especially in terms of goal pursuit. They assert that despite word use being “a meaningful marker and occasional mediator of natural social and personality processes” (p. 548), it is a “relatively unstudied phenomenon” (p. 549). The current research, thus, contributes to a significant gap in the extant literature. Further, some recent research (Senay et al. 2010) points to the importance of investigating the

role of self-talk in motivating future behavior. The current research demonstrates how empowered self-talk can enhance resistance to temptation and motivate goal-directed behavior. In this way, we contribute to the intersection between language use and motivated goal pursuit. Second, we contribute to the growing literature on semantic framing (as distinct from logically equivalent framing effects in the context of choice under uncertainty; Levin and Gaeth 1988), in which two words used interchangeably can have profoundly different influences (Cheema and Patrick 2008; Mayer and Tormala 2010). Finally, we contribute insights into the workings of a practical and viable intervention that might be easily adopted by consumers and corporations (e.g., Weightwatchers) interested in behavior modification.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. We first review the literatures on motivated goal pursuit and verbal framing and rely on them to develop our hypotheses with regard to the differential influence that “don’t” versus “can’t” refusal framing has on individuals’ feelings of empowerment and likelihood of engaging in goal-directed behavior. We then present a set of four studies that investigate the influence of this framing on goal-directed behavior and demonstrate the mediating role of psychological empowerment (studies 1, 2a, and 2b). We also identify a boundary condition for the influence of the empowering “don’t” verbal frame, in that results are reversed (i.e., the “can’t” increases in effectiveness) when an external cause is made salient (studies 2a and 2b). Finally, a field study (study 3) demonstrates the effectiveness of the “don’t” (vs. “can’t”) refusal framing by monitoring persistence in goal pursuit over time. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of the findings and directions for future research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Barriers to Goal Pursuit

Managing progress toward goal achievement is fundamental to theories of self-regulation, and examining factors that hinder or facilitate goal achievement has been a major focus of past research (Bargh and Barndollar 1996; Carver and Scheier 1998). Prior research has identified numerous strategies that individuals rely on in order to successfully achieve their goals. Examples include engagement in compensatory effects (for example, compensatory thoughts or actions can help make up for a loss or deficiency by “building up one’s sense of self, or security about the self” (p 208); Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982), using control strategies (such as emotion control: Kuhl and Beckmann 1994), forming implementation intentions (Gollwitzer 1999), and using mental simulation to envision pathways to goal completion (Taylor et al. 1998).

Goal pursuit can often be exhausting and effortful. Indeed, Baumeister, Vohs, and Tice (1997) characterize goal pursuit, especially for self-regulatory goals, as so effortful as to be depleting. Often, despite good intentions, we lack the motivation to pursue the goals we set for ourselves. For instance, depriving oneself of a desired object can be very demotivating, and after a time one just gives up. In this research, we propose that the way we frame our refusal to give in to temptation may reinforce our goal and give us a sense of empowerment that enables us to sustain our goal pursuit. This framing is achieved via language, and small differences in the words we use have a substantial influence on goal pursuit.

Linguistic framing: Language as a Behavioral Feedback Mechanism

In an early theory on the role of language, Whorf (1956) essentially proposed that there is no thought without language. In other words, individuals' perception of the world is based on the linguistic system they use. Viewed in this light, it is unsurprising that verbal framing has a broad influence on consumer behavior. For instance, language influences persuasion (Mayer and Tormala 2010), categorical perception (Schmitt and Zhang 1998), sensory perception and discrimination (Hoegg and Alba 2007), perceived durations of time intervals (Cheema and Patrick 2008), future behavior (Senay et al. 2010), and even health outcomes (Campbell and Pennebaker 2003).

Considerable research has examined the role played by message framing in persuasion processes (Shiv, Britton, and Payne 2004). A stream of research in the judgment and decision-making literature has focused on the influence of different types of framing that are logically equivalent (e.g., $\frac{1}{2}$ vs. 50%; 3% fat versus 97% fat-free). More recently, research in linguistics and persuasion has focused on the influence of words that are not entirely equivalent but nonetheless quite similar and often used interchangeably. This research is concerned with identifying when, how, and why the word-pairs are effective or persuasive. For instance, Mayer and Tormala (2010) observe the differential effects of “think” versus “feel” frames in persuasion. In a similar vein, Cheema and Patrick (2008) illustrate that the framing of a time interval for coupon redemption as “anytime between” or “only between” significantly influences coupon redemption behavior. Both Cheema and Patrick (2008) and Mayer and Tormala (2010) investigate what might be referred to as “semantic framing,” or the use of objectively similar, albeit not equivalent, words that are often used interchangeably but that have profound differences in the psychological feedback they provide.

This prior research on semantic framing has focused largely on how these different frames are perceived by a *passive* recipient and consequently influence his/her behavior. For instance, Cheema and Patrick (2008) illustrate differential redemption rates for coupons when the redemption time interval was framed restrictively as “only between” or expansively as “anytime between.” The current research focuses on a more *active* framing effect in terms of understanding how the language we use to frame our own choices, that is, framing self-talk, influences our own future behavior. Despite the obvious importance of this issue (Pennebaker et al. 2003), very few studies have embarked on this endeavor. A notable exception is Senay et al. (2010) who demonstrate that an interrogative form (Will I...) of introspective self-talk, compared with a declarative form (I will...), elicits more intrinsically motivated reasons for future action and results in goal-directed behavior. The current research investigates how the decision not to veer away from one’s goal may be framed using the words “don’t” versus “can’t,” thus contributing to a growing literature on verbal framing, and specifically self-talk, in which a sentence can be framed differently by changing only a word or phrase, thus altering the semantic meaning of the sentence.

REFUSAL FRAMING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT

Prior research has consistently demonstrated that perceived control over performance of a behavior can account for considerable variance in intentions and actions (Bandura 1997; Schifter and Ajzen 1985). Strategies that enhance psychological empowerment and feelings of control are thus likely to have a positive influence on goal-directed behavior.

According to Diener and Biswas-Diener (2005) psychological empowerment consists not only of the actual ability to control one's environment, but also of the perception that one can successfully do so. Several concepts in psychology are related to this notion. For instance, self-efficacy, the belief that one can accomplish specific goals (Bandura 1997), internal locus of control (Rotter 1990), and attributing one's accomplishments to one's actions, feelings of autonomy, and competence in goal achievement (Deci and Ryan 1980) all reflect similar notions. Deci and Ryan (2000) distinguish between autonomous motivation and controlled motivation to suggest that "autonomous motivation involves behaving with a full sense of volition and choice whereas controlled motivation involves behaving with the experience of pressure and demand towards specific outcomes that comes from forces perceived to be external to the self." In sum, we conceptualize empowerment as a feeling of strength and control that in turn may help motivate goal pursuit.

Based on the above, we theorize that utilizing a "don't" versus "can't" refusal framing signals the degree of empowerment one has in achieving one's self-regulatory goal, resulting in a differential influence on the likelihood that we will engage in goal-directed behavior. We theorize that saying "I don't do X" connotes a firmly entrenched attitude rather than a temporary situation, and it emphasizes the personal will that drives the refusal. Thus, using the word "don't" serves as a self-affirmation of one's personal willpower and control in the relevant self-regulatory goal pursuit, leading to a favorable influence on feelings of empowerment, as well as on actual behavior. On the other hand, saying "I can't do X" connotes an external focus on impediments. We propose that this latter emphasis results in less feelings of empowerment and thus also hinders the self-regulatory goal pursuit in question.

STUDY 1

Method and Procedure

One hundred and twenty undergraduates participated in a study designed to investigate the differential influence of the “don’t” versus “can’t” framing on actual choice of a tempting item via the mediating role of feelings of empowerment. A secondary purpose of the study was to illustrate that this effect is observed for individuals for whom healthy eating is a relevant goal. In other words, the study was designed to illustrate that empowered refusal framing motivates goal-directed behavior.

Participants first responded to a set of purportedly unrelated questions. Embedded among these was the measure for goal relevance. This was done so as to assess the relevance of a healthy eating goal for each participant without increasing the salience and accessibility of the goal (Fishbach, Friedman, and Kruglanski 2003). Goal relevance was measured as the extent to which they were concerned with healthy eating (nine-point Likert scale: 1 = Not at all, 9 = Extremely). Next, participants were asked to begin the study by responding to a new strategy for maintaining healthy eating. They were given a description of either the “don’t” or the “can’t” strategy for refusing a temptation. They were told that each time they were faced with a temptation, they would tell themselves “I don’t do X” or “I can’t do X,” depending on the experimental condition. They were asked to rehearse the strategy by saying: “For instance, when you are tempted by an unhealthy snack, you say “I don’t eat X” (“I can’t eat X”).” Participants next reported the extent to which using this strategy made them feel psychologically empowered (How do you feel about using this strategy of saying “I don’t (can’t)” to achieve your goals? In

control: 1 = not at all; 9 = very much; Empowered: 1 = not at all; 9 = very much. The two items were later combined to form an empowerment index; $r = .81$). Participants then moved on to an unrelated study before the end of the experimental session. The main independent variable was captured as the participants were leaving the experiment room. As each participant turned in their questionnaire, they were asked to choose between two snacks provided by the experimenter as a token of appreciation. The snack choices were chocolate candy bars or granola health bars which were presented in two separate bowls. By discreetly marking each questionnaire as it was turned in, the experimenter covertly noted the choice that each participant made.

Results and Discussion

An ANOVA with refusal framing (don't vs. can't) as the independent variable and the empowerment index as the dependent variable revealed the expected main effect ($M_{\text{don't}} = 6.17$ vs. $M_{\text{can't}} = 5.09$, $F(1, 117) = 11.34$, $p < .01$).

Chi-square analysis revealed that 64% (36%) of the participants in the "don't" condition chose the granola health bar (chocolate candy bar), as compared to 39% (61%) in the "can't" condition ($\chi^2(1) = 6.59$, $p < .05$). Six participants in the "don't" condition and three participants in the "can't" condition refrained from choosing any snack and were therefore excluded from the analysis. This finding supports our theorizing that using the "don't" refusal frame is more empowering and is more likely to lead to resistance to temptation than the "can't" refusal frame.

A set of binary logistic regressions was conducted to further investigate the relationship between refusal framing and snack choice, as well as the moderating role of goal relevance in this relationship. In the first regression, refusal framing, mean-centered goal relevance, and the

interaction between the two were included as predictors. As expected, participants in the “don’t” (“can’t”) condition were more likely to choose the healthy (unhealthy) snack ($\beta = -1.06$, $\chi^2(1) = 6.76$, $p < .01$). Results also revealed a significant two-way interaction between refusal framing and goal relevance ($\beta = -.71$, $\chi^2(1) = 5.60$, $p < .05$). To explore the nature of the interaction, we followed the procedure recommended by Aiken and West (1991; Fitzsimons 2008). A spotlight analysis at plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean of goal relevance revealed that participants in the “don’t” condition were more likely than those in the “can’t” condition to choose the healthy (vs. unhealthy) snack when goal relevance was high ($\beta = -2.04$, $\chi^2(1) = 11.35$, $p < .01$), but not significantly so when goal relevance was low ($\beta = -.08$, $\chi^2(1) = .02$, $p > .89$). In other words, although all participants reported some level of goal relevance, those with lower goal relevance were not differentially influenced by refusal framing.

Mediation analysis (Baron and Kenny 1986) supported full mediation by the empowerment index of the influence of refusal framing on choice. First, regression analysis showed a significant effect of refusal framing on choice ($\beta = -1.00$, $\chi^2(1) = 6.45$, $p < .05$). The effect of refusal framing on the empowerment index was also significant ($\beta = 1.08$, $t(117) = 3.37$, $p < .01$), as was the effect of the empowerment index on choice ($\beta = -2.29$, $\chi^2(1) = 23.72$, $p < .001$). Finally, the regression analysis with refusal framing and the empowerment index included in the model as predictors of choice revealed a significant effect of the empowerment index ($\beta = -2.29$, $\chi^2(1) = 23.34$, $p < .001$), while the effect of refusal framing was rendered non-significant ($\beta = -.27$, $\chi^2(1) = .16$, $p > .68$).

These results support our central thesis that the more empowering a refusal frame is the more effective it is in motivating goal-directed behavior. Specifically, we show that for

individuals for whom healthy eating was a relevant goal, the two refusal frames (“don’t” versus “can’t”) have a differential influence on actual choice behavior, and this effect is mediated by psychological empowerment. The following two experiments were designed to investigate the conditions under which consumers perceive the “don’t” versus “can’t” refusal framing as effective strategies for goal pursuit. Specifically, we theorize in the section that follows that feelings of empowerment and perceptions of effectiveness of the “don’t” framing will manifest themselves in consumers with an internal focus, but that this will not be the case for consumers with an external focus.

THE INFLUENCE OF INTERNAL VERSUS EXTERNAL FOCUS

Even if two consumers have the same operative goal, the source of motivation to pursue this goal may be different. Indeed, much prior literature has investigated the effect of goals with different foci. For instance, the source of the goal to learn text material or engage in physical exercise may be intrinsic (related to the self: e.g., personal growth) or extrinsic (related to some external cause: e.g., impressing others; Vansteenkiste et al. 2004). Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2000) similarly postulates that an action might stem from an internal drive and be performed for its own sake or it might be motivated by some external cause and be performed as a means to an end. We refer to this as having an internal versus external focus, respectively.

We propose that the effectiveness of the “don’t” versus “can’t” framing is moderated by this focus. Since the “don’t” frame suggests a stable and unchanging stance that invokes the self (“this is who I am”), it is more effective when goal focus is internal and related to the self (I *don’t* eat fast-food), but it decreases in effectiveness when related to an external cause (I don’t

eat fast food till the wedding). On the other hand, a “can’t” frame which implicitly suggests some barrier that prevents action is more effective when related to an external cause (“I can’t eat fast food till the wedding) versus an internal cause (“I can’t eat fast food because this is who I am”).

The affirmation of one’s identity resonates with an internal focus. This is consistent with Deci and Ryan’s (1987, 1025) characterization of autonomy and empowerment as that which is “an inner endorsement of one’s actions, the sense that they emanate from oneself and are one’s own.” The “can’t” framing, which implies a specific reason, resonates with an external cause. In this context, the term “can’t” no longer merely connotes an impediment; it communicates what one “must not” do, for the sake of the external cause. It signals commitment and accountability to the cause and emphasizes the value of the goal, which one simply must not forsake. Although not the focus of the current research, we rely on a growing number of studies that have found that interpersonal relationships and external causes can effectively shape an individual’s capacity for self-regulation (Diamond and Aspinwall 2003; Mikulincer, Shaver, and Pereg 2003; Wegner and Erber 1993) to posit that commitment and accountability to an external cause or individual can lead to increased feelings of empowerment and, consequently, goal-directed behavior. We discuss this notion further in the general discussion section.

Conversely, the “don’t” framing implies that one does (or refrains from doing) something for one’s own sake. Therefore, we expect that an external reason will not increase the effectiveness of the “don’t” framing but in fact may even decrease motivation and effectiveness if the external reason is sufficiently specific and other-focused to render the general, self-affirming “don’t” framing inappropriate for such a cause. We thus propose that the “can’t” framing is more effective than the “don’t” framing in connection with a salient external cause. In the two studies that follow, we vary the nature of the cause to be external (helping a friend (study

2a) or attending a social event (study 2b)) or internal (personal goal) and thus illustrate the conditions under which the “can’t” framing increases in effectiveness.

STUDY 2A

Method and Procedure

One hundred and seventy-nine adults (80.6% male, median age range = 35 – 44 yrs) participated in an experiment via a Qualtrics interface. The participant pool consists of over 3 million unique panel members. To avoid self-selection and professional survey takers, Qualtrics utilizes by-invitation-only online panel recruitment, thus attracting a cross section that better generalizes to the population at large. All participants were presented with a scenario in which they were asked to imagine that they had decided to work out at the gym on a regular basis with a close friend for the next year. This ensured that all participants had the same operative goal and the same temporal horizon. Participants in the internal (external) focus condition further read that they had decided to work out “...on a regular basis for a year, knowing that if you skip out, it may have consequences for your own health (it may have health consequences for him/her).” Participants were given the “don’t” or “can’t” framing, along with examples such as “I don’t (can’t) skip the gym,” or “I don’t (can’t) skip my workout.” The study was thus a 2 (framing: don’t vs. can’t) x 2 (focus: internal vs. external) between-subjects experiment. As in the previous study, participants read the scenario and then answered a battery of questions. The empowerment index ($r = .83$) was the same as in study 1. Participants were also asked how effective the strategy was and how likely they were to use it (How effective do you think this “don’t”

(“can’t”) strategy is to stick with the workouts? How likely would you be to use this strategy of saying “I don’t (can’t) skip out?”: 1= not at all; 9 = extremely; The two items were later combined to form an effectiveness index; $r = .78$). As a manipulation check for focus, participants reported on a nine-point scale for whom they were trying to stick with the workouts (1 = for myself; 9 = for my friend). Results revealed the expected main effect of focus ($M_{\text{internal}} = 3.92$ vs. $M_{\text{external}} = 6.45$, $F(1, 173) = 49.59$, $p < .001$).

Results

A two-way ANOVA with refusal framing (don’t vs. can’t) and focus (internal vs. external) as the independent variables and the effectiveness index as the dependent variable revealed the expected framing x focus interaction ($M_{\text{don’t, internal}} = 5.98$ vs. $M_{\text{can’t, internal}} = 4.79$ vs. $M_{\text{don’t, external}} = 4.60$ vs. $M_{\text{can’t, external}} = 5.81$, $F(1, 174) = 16.59$, $p < .001$). Contrast analysis revealed that the don’t-internal condition was significantly different from the can’t-internal condition ($p < .01$) and that the don’t-external condition was different from the can’t-external condition ($p < .01$). See table 1. A similar ANOVA on the empowerment index revealed a main effect of framing ($M_{\text{don’t}} = 5.96$ vs. $M_{\text{can’t}} = 5.32$, $F(1, 175) = 5.68$, $p < .05$) and a framing x focus interaction ($M_{\text{don’t, internal}} = 6.87$ vs. $M_{\text{can’t, internal}} = 4.76$ vs. $M_{\text{don’t, external}} = 5.13$ vs. $M_{\text{can’t, external}} = 5.80$, $F(1, 175) = 21.02$, $p < .001$). See table 1.

Insert table 1 about here

Mediation analysis was conducted to demonstrate the role of the empowerment index in the influence of refusal framing on the effectiveness index. Consistent with the above theorizing, the analysis confirmed mediation within the internal focus condition. First, regression analysis showed a significant effect of refusal framing on the effectiveness index ($\beta = 1.18$, $t(81) = 2.70$, $p < .01$). The effect of refusal framing on the empowerment index was also significant ($\beta = 2.11$, $t(82) = 5.21$, $p < .001$), as was the effect of the empowerment index on the effectiveness index ($\beta = .68$, $t(81) = 8.43$, $p < .001$). Finally, the regression analysis with refusal framing and the empowerment index included in the model as predictors of the effectiveness index revealed a significant effect of the empowerment index ($\beta = .73$, $t(80) = 7.74$, $p < .001$), while the effect of refusal framing was rendered non-significant ($\beta = .43$, $t(80) = 1.09$, $p > .28$). This demonstrates the expected full mediation in the internal focus condition. The same mediation was not found in the external focus condition, where framing was a directionally consistent but non-significant predictor of empowerment ($p > .14$).

These results replicate the pattern of results from the previous study for the internal focus condition. Additionally, a boundary condition was demonstrated in that the “can’t” framing is more effective in the context of an external focus. We suggest that the effectiveness of the “can’t” strategy in the external focus condition can be explained by commitment (and occasionally accountability) to an external cause and not via empowerment, as evidenced by the absence of mediation. The following study was designed to replicate study 2a in a different context, using a different variation of an external cause.

STUDY 2B

Method and Procedure

One hundred and twenty undergraduates (47% male) read a scenario in which they imagined that they had a goal to lose weight. Participants in the internal focus condition further read that “You want to be able to look at yourself a month from now and feel happy about how good you look and feel.” Those in the external focus condition read that “Your best friend is getting married in a month and you want to look really good at the wedding.” Participants were given the “don’t” or “can’t” framing, along with examples such as “I don’t (can’t) eat ice-cream,” or “I don’t (can’t) eat pumpkin pie.” The study was thus a 2 (framing: don’t vs. can’t) x 2 (focus: internal vs. external) between-subjects experiment. As in the previous studies, participants read the scenario and then answered a battery of questions. The empowerment index ($r = .74$) and the effectiveness index ($r = .81$) were the same as in the previous studies. A pretest was run with 51 undergraduates to assess the relative focus that each of the two scenarios described above entailed. Participants were presented with one of the two weight-loss scenarios and then responded to the question: “What is the source of motivation for your weight-loss goal?” on a nine-point scale (Yourself = 1, Others = 9). Results of the pretest supported the use of these scenarios to manipulate internal versus external focus ($M_{\text{internal}} = 2.42$ vs. $M_{\text{external}} = 5.64$, $F(1, 49) = 59.78$, $p < .001$).

Results

A two-way ANOVA with refusal framing (don’t vs. can’t) and focus (internal vs. external) as the independent variables and the effectiveness index as the dependent variable

revealed a main effect of focus ($M_{\text{internal}} = 3.30$ vs. $M_{\text{external}} = 4.88$, $F(1, 116) = 20.66$, $p < .001$) and the expected framing x focus interaction ($M_{\text{don't, internal}} = 4.09$ vs. $M_{\text{can't, internal}} = 2.52$ vs. $M_{\text{don't, external}} = 4.08$ vs. $M_{\text{can't, external}} = 5.63$, $F(1, 116) = 20.74$, $p < .001$). Contrast analysis revealed that the don't-internal condition was significantly different from the can't-internal condition ($p < .01$) and that the don't-external condition was different from the can't-external condition ($p < .01$). See table 1. A similar ANOVA on the empowerment index revealed a main effect of focus ($M_{\text{internal}} = 4.54$ vs. $M_{\text{external}} = 5.77$, $F(1, 116) = 13.68$, $p < .001$) and a framing x focus interaction ($M_{\text{don't, internal}} = 5.17$ vs. $M_{\text{can't, internal}} = 3.91$ vs. $M_{\text{don't, external}} = 5.15$ vs. $M_{\text{can't, external}} = 6.36$, $F(1, 116) = 14.19$, $p < .001$). See table 1.

As in study 2a, we predicted mediation by the empowerment index of the influence of refusal framing on the effectiveness index within the internal focus condition. First, regression analysis showed a significant effect of refusal framing on the effectiveness index ($\beta = 1.57$, $t(56) = 3.37$, $p < .01$). The effect of refusal framing on the empowerment index was also significant ($\beta = 1.26$, $t(56) = 2.86$, $p < .01$), as was the effect of the empowerment index on the effectiveness index ($\beta = .72$, $t(56) = 6.58$, $p < .001$). Finally, the regression analysis with refusal framing and the empowerment index included in the model as predictors of the effectiveness index revealed a significant effect of the empowerment index ($\beta = .64$, $t(55) = 5.61$, $p < .001$), while the effect of refusal framing was rendered non-significant ($\beta = .77$, $t(55) = 1.91$, $p > .06$). This once again replicates the results from the previous two studies.

In contrast to study 2a, this pattern of results was replicated for the external focus condition. This raises an interesting question regarding the effectiveness of the “can’t” framing in this condition. It is possible that in this condition, empowerment stems from commitment to the external cause. We return to this issue in the general discussion section.

Discussion

The set of studies presented so far has provided support for our theorizing. Specifically, 1) the “don’t” frame is more effective than the “can’t” frame as a refusal strategy, 2) feelings of empowerment underlie this effectiveness, and 3) external focus is a boundary condition in which the “can’t” frame becomes more effective than the “don’t” frame. Next, we test the efficacy of the “don’t” (vs. “can’t”) refusal framing strategy in the real world to facilitate goal-directed behavior over a period of time. Study 3 was designed for this purpose using only participants with an internal focus.

STUDY 3: FIELD EXPERIMENT

This study relies on a typical intervention type experimental design characteristic of field-based research in psychology (Vansteenkiste et al. 2004). Based on that methodology, the effectiveness of an intervention (in this case the use of the “don’t” versus the “can’t” strategy for goal pursuit) is measured by how long individuals continue to use a given strategy or persist in a given task while continuing doing what they do in their daily lives. Previous research shows that individuals who feel success is in their control are less likely to withdraw from the intervention program (Sitzmann and Ely 2010), indicating the effectiveness of the intervention. In the current study, we expect that if the “don’t” (vs. “can’t”) framing strategy works in the real world for real people, then individuals who commit to using the strategy are more likely to continue using it.

We thus hypothesize that the “don’t” framing is likely to result in lower attrition rates (higher persistence) than the “can’t” framing for consumers with an internal focus.

Method and Procedure

Thirty working women ($M_{\text{age}} = 31$ yrs, age range: 22 – 53 years) who signed up to attend a health and wellness seminar organized by the authors participated in the field study. The seminar was designed for individuals with long-term personal health improvement goals. As a follow-up to the seminar, they were encouraged to participate in a program in which they would adopt a new strategy and report how well the strategy was working for them every day for a 10-day period. All participants were given written instructions pertaining to what was described as an easy to implement health and wellness improvement program. They were told to identify some areas in which they wanted to improve. Although these improvements should reflect long-term goals, participants would submit the actual progress reports for only ten days, or until they gave up on the strategy because it was not working for them. Participants were assigned to either a “don’t” or a “can’t” framing condition. In other words, when they were tempted to lapse in the pursuit of their goals they should use the “don’t” (vs. “can’t”) strategy. Additionally, a non-specific control condition was added, in which participants were told that when they were tempted to lapse in the pursuit of their goals they should simply refuse or “just say no.”

As part of the procedure, participants received a welcome email with a link to an online diary. They were told that they would receive an email every day for 10 days and were asked to report their progress using the given strategy as long as it continued to work for them. Specifically, they were told: “During the 10-day window you will receive emails to remind you

to use the strategy and to report instances in which it worked or did not work. If the strategy is not working for you, just drop us a line and say so and you can stop responding to the emails.” Thus, the goal of the study was to measure the effectiveness of the “don’t” versus the “can’t” strategy by monitoring persistence in goal pursuit. Persistence was measured as the number of days participants continued to report goal progress in the online diary. We expected that using the “don’t” refusal framing would increase persistence by empowering individuals to stick with their goals.

Results

Results revealed that 8 (of 10) participants in the “don’t” condition persisted the full ten days, that is, the entire duration of the study, whereas only 1 (of 10) participant in the “can’t” condition and 3 (of 10) participants in the control condition did so. See figure 1 for an overview of the number of days persisted for each participant.

Insert figure 1 about here

An ANOVA with refusal framing as the independent variable and number of days of persistence as the dependent variable revealed a significant main effect ($M_{\text{don't}} = 9.20$ vs. $M_{\text{can't}} = 2.90$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 5.20$, $F(2, 27) = 11.82$, $p < .001$). As expected, contrast analysis revealed that the “don’t” condition was different from the “can’t” condition ($p < .001$), as well as from the control condition ($p < .01$).

Based on Diener and Biswas-Diener (2005) and Deci and Ryan (1980), evidence of empowerment is indicated by increased feelings of autonomy and control, greater self-awareness, and positive behavioral change. Examples of open-ended diary entries (see the Appendix) of participants using the “don’t” strategy illustrate the role of empowerment in the effectiveness of this refusal framing.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The subtle use of language and insightful turns of phrase have long been considered the purview of wordsmiths from Shakespeare to Dr. Seuss. Recent research has suggested that the way in which we use language in everyday life can provide insights about individuals’ psychology and social interactions and can have important consequences for their actions in a variety of domains. That research has focused not only on *what* is communicated but on *how* it is communicated in terms of the actual words used. The current paper contributes to this stream of work by focusing on how refusal framing can help motivate goal pursuit.

With a set of three experiments and one field study we investigate the empowering influence of using “don’t” versus “can’t” to frame a refusal. We demonstrate that this form of self-talk motivates goal-directed behavior (studies 1-3) when the source of the goal is internal (studies 2a and 2b) and that this effect is mediated by psychological empowerment (studies 1, 2a, and 2b). We show these effects not only with actual choice (study 1) and behavioral intent (studies 2a and 2b), but also demonstrate its applicability in the real world using a longitudinal intervention-based field study (study 3).

Limitations and Issues for Further Investigation

Given our nascent understanding of linguistic framing, the current research raises a set of questions that remain unanswered. For instance, while the current research has demonstrated the mediating role of empowerment in the favorable influence of the “don’t” framing on both behavior and perceived effectiveness, the underlying mechanism for the efficacy of the “can’t” frame in the external focus condition still remains to be empirically investigated. We tentatively explain the pattern of results as follows. We propose that the “can’t” strategy is effective in the external focus condition because it connotes commitment and accountability to the external cause. Commitment can be empowering because it entails a focus on the goal rather than on impediments or personal limitations, which might also help explain some previous findings that goal commitment enhances performance (Klein et al. 1999). Conversely, the “don’t” frame invokes a permanent internal state, which does not align with a specific external cause. To explain this with an example, we expect that the “don’t” frame is likely to be effective for a Weightwatchers member who focuses on her general ideal of staying slim. However, the “can’t” strategy is likely to be effective if she focuses on the next time she needs to weigh in. In refusing to eat something it is viable to tell oneself “I can’t eat the extra slice of bread since I need to weigh in at Weightwatchers on Saturday.” This commitment and accountability to an external cause (especially to another individual) has been demonstrated in previous research to be effective in facilitating self-control (see Seeley and Gardner 2006 for a review). As ironic as it sounds to employ others in one’s own goal pursuit, this can be an effective self-regulatory strategy. Future research might investigate the role of interpersonal relationships in intrapersonal self-regulatory processes.

Another issue not fully resolved is why empowerment (via the use of the “don’t” strategy) leads to persistence in goal pursuit, as observed in study 3. One possible explanation relies on a resource-based perspective. The current research conceptualizes empowerment as a feeling of strength and control, and this might influence the availability of resources in two different ways. On one hand, since empowerment is a powerful and positive feeling that is reinforced by successful goal pursuit, one might posit that this feeling can *generate increased resources* and result in the motivation to continue to persist in goal pursuit over the long term. On the other hand, it seems likely that pursuing a goal that is not within one’s own control will deplete available resources, since one must from the outset strive to overcome the feeling of one’s own inability. Conversely, pursuing a goal that feels under one’s own control should *utilize fewer resources* for goal pursuit. These two routes to explain the influence of empowerment on goal pursuit over the long term might be empirically contrasted in future research.

Another question is whether framing leads to higher perceived goal importance, lower perceived value of the temptation, or both. For instance, since the “don’t” frame implicates the self, it may highlight the long-term goal of health. Conversely, since the “can’t” framing focuses on resisting the temptation, it may highlight the tempting object more strongly. While this research has focused on empowerment to explain the role of the “don’t” frame, the mechanism by which it works may be further explored in future research.

Implications, Links to the Extant Research, and Future Directions

In addition to the previously discussed theoretical contributions, especially to the literatures on motivated goal pursuit and semantic framing, this research also has clear practical

implications. As evidenced by study 3, the “don’t” versus “can’t” refusal framing is a simple strategy that consumers can adopt to facilitate goal pursuit, especially when the desired behavior is self-directed. In addition, the “don’t” framing strategy can serve as a viable intervention that organizations that market behavior modification or reinforcement programs might be able to use. The specific wording may also be used in advertising and other communication materials to connote empowerment and efficacy, or lack thereof. In general, the implications of the psychology underlying language use, especially in a communications-based field like marketing, are virtually endless.

Subtle verbal (and non-verbal) cues such as the ones under investigation in the current research are easy to overlook, and yet they may have a substantial influence on a wide variety of consumer perceptions and behaviors. Potential domains of investigation include those related to self-control, like hyperopia. Such aversion to indulgence has been demonstrated to be conceptually and empirically distinct from self-control (Haws and Poynor 2008), and thus variables such as refusal framing may have different influences in these domains. Further, the influence of refusal framing may also vary among individuals. For instance, if consumers possess traits that strongly conflict with a given self-control goal, it may be that refusal framing is not enough to stop them from reverting to default behavior (Poynor and Haws 2008). Additionally, future research may focus on the influence of subtle verbal cues on others. Extending work by Niederhoffer and Pennebaker (2002), one might suggest that the use of words like “don’t” or “can’t” may have a contagion effect and influence the feelings of empowerment towards goal achievement experienced by others. These authors find that two people talking in person or via computers tend to match each other’s linguistic style. Thus, one individual using

certain words may result in others doing the same, with the subsequent emotional and behavioral consequences this may have for the mimicking consumer.

In the current research, we demonstrate an important link between word choice and motivation. It would be interesting for researchers to identify the words used to motivate higher and faster performance. For instance, the wording of an appointment letter might be used to energize a new employee even more than monetary compensation does, or the way an editor phrases his letters to authors might reduce turnaround times at an academic journal. Generally speaking, future research could identify and map out a vast variety of effects arising from verbal framing and language use. This would be important not only to better understand the effect of what marketers say to consumers, but also to understand what consumers say to marketers and researchers. As Senay et al. (2010) note, we often rely on self-reports and thought protocols to understand behavior, and in doing so we take the words consumers use to describe new products or ad concepts at face value. This might explain why a lot of products and ads that do well in research fail in the marketplace. Decoding how (actual language used) interviewees and focus group participants describe ads or new products that go on to fail in the marketplace might help managers avoid making costly mistakes in the future. In other words, it might be possible for market researchers to identify key words and phrases that serve as red (or green) flags.

The process mechanisms underlying the encoding of the semantic meaning of two similar sets of words is also unknown. Do consumers do this automatically (a System 1 process), or do they need additional cognitive resources to tease out the subtleties of language (a System 2 process)? Further, most semantic framing research has so far been done in English. It would also be interesting to examine whether similar effects are observed using different languages.

Language is one of the most important tools known to humankind. Indeed, many would argue that it represents the single most important development in human history. An increased understanding of its intricate nature may constitute the difference between wielding language as a club and wielding it as a surgical instrument.

Appendix

Evidence of Empowerment from Online Diary Data for the “Don’t” Refusal Strategy

Evidence of Empowerment	Open-ended Example
Increased feelings of autonomy and control	Today I was very good about not eating unhealthy foods. I also paid closer attention in order to avoid coffee all day this time around. I feel better that I have a bit more control over my choices. (AL) * The system definitely has its advantages of making you feel in control and changing your attitude about your actions. (AM)
Increased self-awareness	I found that most of the time, this self pep talk really seemed to realign my thoughts of what I want (AM) I have been more aware of what I am eating and more inclined to make it to the gym. (RW) [...] making more conscious effort to keep the Dont's in mind & also getting into the habit more now. (SS) I thought the strategy was overall a nice reminder of when to say no. When opting out of using the elevator or saying no to dessert after dinner, that's when the 'don't' strategy worked best for me. It also had an encouraging effect on me to help me get to the gym! (RW)
Positive behavioral change	[...] after weeks of thinking about working out, I finally started! (AM) [...] cut up an apple and snack on that [:] something I haven't done in years. I would normally just reach for the potato chips. (JR) I saw a domino effect of better choices, smaller portions and more fruits & vegetables. (NC) I've actually lost a couple pounds, and find myself making much healthier choices on a daily bases. (NC) I don't arrive half an hour late for work." Although I overslept this morning, amazingly I arrived at work pretty much on time. (MN) [...] felt renewed dedication to shedding these extra pounds. My new strategy is that "I don't" drive across campus in my car any more. I bought a used folding bicycle this weekend that I can keep in my office and use to ride across campus for meetings and events. (SB)

* Participant Initials

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Table 1**Studies 2a and 2b: The Influence of Framing on Effectiveness and Empowerment**

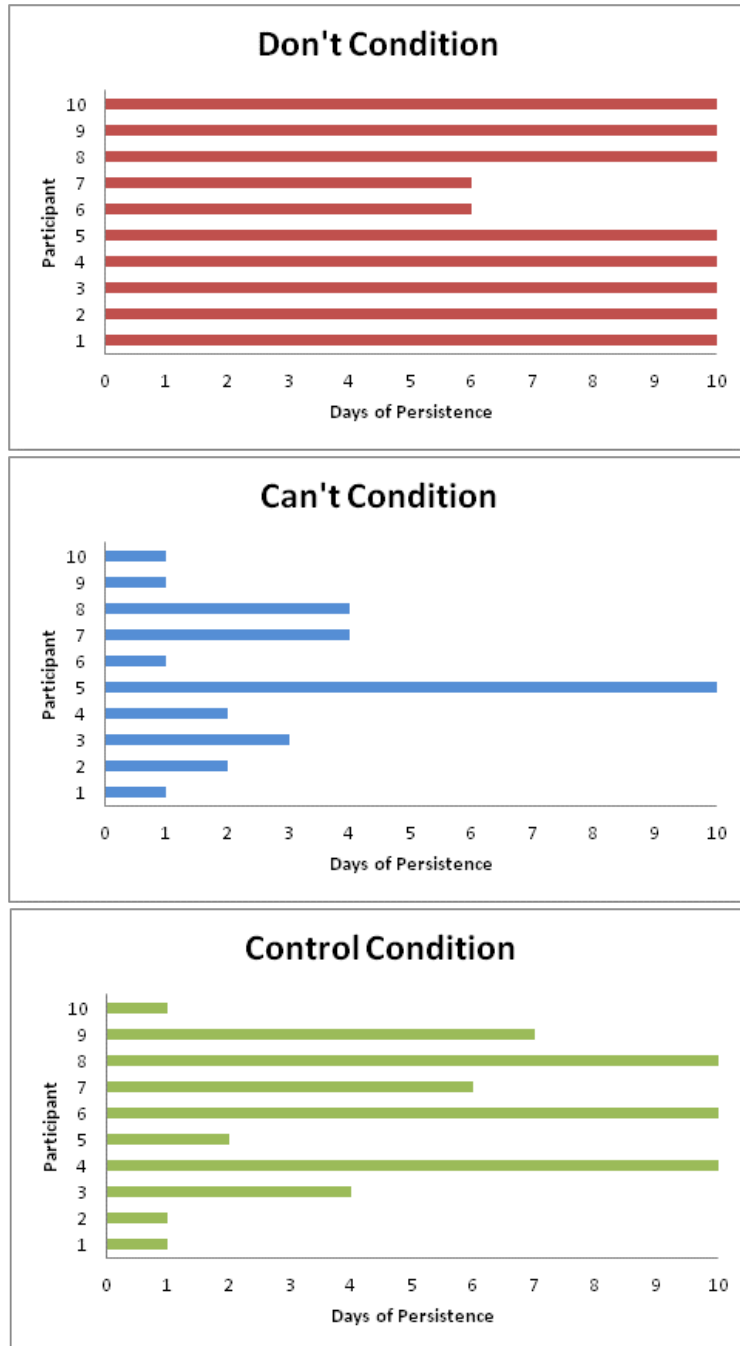
	Effectiveness		Empowerment	
	Don't	Can't	Don't	Can't
Study 2a				
Internal	5.98 [*]	4.79 [*]	6.87 ^{**}	4.76 ^{**}
External	4.60 [*]	5.81 [*]	5.13	5.80
Study 2b				
Internal	4.09 [*]	2.52 [*]	5.17 ^{**}	3.91 ^{**}
External	4.08 [*]	5.63 [*]	5.15 ^{**}	6.36 ^{**}

^{*}, ^{**} $p < .05$, across columns

FIGURE 1

DAYS OF PERSISTENCE IN STUDY 3

Figure 1
Days of Persistence in Study 3



1) THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2) Barriers to Goal Pursuit

2) Linguistic framing: Language as a Behavioral Feedback Mechanism

1) REFUSAL FRAMING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT**1) STUDY 1**

2) Method and Procedure

2) Results and Discussion

1) THE INFLUENCE OF INTERNAL VERSUS EXTERNAL FOCUS**1) STUDY 2A**

2) Method and Procedure

2) Results

1) STUDY 2B

2) Method and Procedure

2) Results

2) Discussion

1) STUDY 3: FIELD EXPERIMENT

2) Method and Procedure

2) Results

1) GENERAL DISCUSSION

2) Limitations and Issues for Further Investigation

2) Implications, Links to the Extant Research, and Future Directions