

TOO MUCH TO DO: AN EXAMINATION OF PREDICTION DIFFERENCES AND EXTERNAL CONSEQUENCES RELATED TO TASK COMPLETION

Therese A. Louie, San Jose State University, College of Business, 1 Washington Square, San Jose, CA 95192-0069; (408) 924-3454.

Mahesh N. Rajan, San Jose State University, College of Business, 1 Washington Square, San Jose, CA 95192-0069; (408) 924-3537.

Annie Vu, San Jose State University, College of Business, 1 Washington Square, San Jose, CA 95192-0069; (408) 924-3506.

ABSTRACT

This work provides a preliminary examination of (a) the tasks individuals plan to complete in a four-week time frame, (b) the degree to which they fulfill their goals, and (c) the external consequences related to task completion. Undergraduate students were asked to list tasks unrelated to school and work that they planned to complete in a month. Data analyses reveal that female students created longer to-do lists, but completed the same amount of tasks as males. In addition, the task completion was directionally related to positive exam performance. Discussion focuses on future research.

INTRODUCTION

Two major sources of stress in consumers' lives are how to spend their time (Andrews 2004) and money (Mellan 1994). Although monetary consumption patterns have been examined over the years (e.g., Scott 1976), the issue of time has been given much less attention. Buehler, Griffin, and Ross (1994) found that people underestimate how long it will take them to complete tasks. This occurs because (a) they make plans based upon the time they presently have available, without using relevant past experiences as a guide, and (b) they make attributions that diminish external factors (e.g., unexpected occurrences) that cause delays, and do not learn that such hindrances are likely to arise again in the future.

Much of Buehler, Griffin, and Ross's (1994) work focused on the completion of one task (e.g., writing a thesis). In contrast, this work examines the degree to which individuals complete a variety of chores and tasks within a month-long time frame. What happens to the day-to-day tasks that students plan to complete outside of their school and work responsibilities? Investigating students' planned and actually completed activities may provide additional insights into why they—and consumers in general—are often pressed for time. How many tasks are typically completed? What variables affect the creation of their "to-do" lists?

One factor that may have an influence on list generation is gender. Research findings (Meyers-Levy 1988) suggest that while males process information in a quick, heuristic fashion, females are more inclined to use detailed processing. Meyers-Levy and Sternthal (1991) found that females were more likely than males to note words incongruous with a general description, presumably due to the former's more piecemeal processing. When asked to enumerate tasks, females' detailed thinking might lead on average to longer to-do lists than those created by males. This prompts us to present the following hypothesis.

H1: Females will list more tasks to complete within four weeks than will males.

Although females might find numerous factors to list, are they more likely to finish those tasks? Research findings suggest that females are more risk averse than are males (Barke, Jenkins-Smith, and Slovic 1997). For example, Hourani and LaFleur (1995) measured sunscreen use among individuals participating in free skin cancer screening clinics. They found that females are likely to take the time to use sunscreen as a precautionary measure. In contrast, males are more likely to need drastic incentives (e.g., a family history of skin cancer) to take the same actions. Not finishing a to-do list task does not normally entail drastic consequences such as contracting a disease. Still, if females are in general more averse to taking chances, to the degree that not meeting deadlines poses risks (e.g., late fees charged for tardy bill paying), it is possible that females may be more prompted than males to complete tasks.

H2: Females will complete more tasks on their lists than will males.

It is worthwhile to note at this point that the inclination to finish tasks may have overall favorable or unfavorable effects. The ability to complete tasks may signal a tendency to be organized and, hence, to

perform well in general outside of the realm of to-do lists. Alternatively, a preoccupation with completing the items might reduce largely the time to focus on other important activities. In this work, we investigate this question by examining if task completion focuses or draws students' attention away from their studies. Specifically, we examine if an ability to finish the tasks correlates negatively or positively with students' school performances. Because productivity generally requires a degree of discipline and organization, it is proposed that the relationship between the two factors is positive.

H3: The propensity to complete tasks will be positively related to student performance.

In short, in this research we examine if there are gender differences in the creation and the completion of to-do lists. We also examine if the ability to complete tasks correlates with students' performances.

METHOD

Fifty-seven undergraduate marketing students (46% male) enrolled in an undergraduate marketing course at a large public university participated in the study. They composed a list in which they wrote all the tasks unrelated to school and work that they planned to complete in four weeks. The lists were returned to them exactly four weeks later. At that time, the students noted tasks they completed with a "+." At about the same time in the term, students' performances on a major course exam were noted.

RESULTS

Analyses were conducted on the length of participants' tasks lists, the extent of task completion, and the relationship of completed tasks to their exam performance.

Length Of Tasks Lists

Across the total sample, the average number of tasks listed is 6.97 ($SD = 3.35$). Consistent with the notion that females engage in more detailed processing than males, ANOVA reveals that the average total number of tasks listed is higher for females ($M = 7.80$, $SD = 3.84$) than for males ($M = 5.87$, $SD = 2.22$), $F_{1, 52} = 4.62$, $p < .04$. This supports hypothesis one.

Tasks Completed

Across the sample, 51% of the tasks were completed. The average total number of tasks completed is 3.62 ($SD = 2.34$). Contrary to the notion that females

might finish more tasks than males, there is no difference in completion across the genders, ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 2.64$, and $M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.93$, respectively), $F_{1, 52} = 0.15$, *ns*. The total number of tasks completed across genders does not support hypothesis two.

Relationship Of Completed Tasks To Exam Performance

As stated previously, it was desirable to examine if task completion signals that an individual is organized, and can perform well in general, or if it distracts from other important activities. Analyses using correlations are inconclusive, but lean slightly toward the former interpretation. Specifically, the relationship between the number of tasks completed and exam performance is not significant but is marginally positive, $r = .23$, $p < .10$. Hence, hypothesis three is not supported, but is in the predicted direction.

DISCUSSION

The examination of to-do lists reveals some gender differences. As anticipated, female students created longer lists than their male counterparts. The number of tasks completed was similar for both genders. In terms of bottom line consequences, task completion is not heavily related to exam performance.

This research is a preliminary project that investigates the nature of students' to-do lists. Each of the measured variables can be probed further for a better understanding of the consequences of creating and adhering to such lists. For example, given that females create longer lists, it would be worthwhile to examine if the type of tasks they list differs from males. To what degree do the two groups list tasks related to their physical appearance (e.g., exercising, or getting a hair cut), to their household activities (e.g., mowing the lawn, or cleaning the kitchen), or to interpersonal tasks (e.g., buying gifts)? Understanding the content, as well as the length, of to-do lists would shed insight into the types of responsibilities undertaken by male and female students.

Given that only 51% of the tasks listed were completed, it would be interesting to note what role the to-do lists play. Do they help to keep students organized? Or, given the fairly low task completion rate, are such lists a source of frustration? Hypothesis two in this study was based upon females' proposed higher level of risk aversion. Although they did not complete more tasks as expected, a different way to examine uncertainty would be, again, to note the types of tasks listed. If males noted more tasks that

absolutely had to be completed (e.g., fixing the clog in the kitchen sink) and females mentioned more maintenance-oriented tasks (e.g., pouring drain cleaner down the sink to prevent clogs), there might be support of the hypothesis.

Finally, the directional effect between the number of tasks completed and exam performance suggests that this question may be worth further examination. Perhaps a larger sample size would show a stronger relationship between these two factors. Regardless of the effect of higher statistical power, the influence of task completion on exam performance would provide insights into how students' attempt to balance their lives, and may have applications for how professionals attempt to juggle their responsibilities.

It is important to note limitations to this work. First, the data are all self reported. Although it appears that the students answered honestly (i.e., a 51% completion rate is nothing to brag about), it is impossible to know whether or not they truly completed the tasks that they said they would. Self-presentation effects may have prompted them to want to appear to have strong time management skills.

Another limitation is that we did not ask students if there were extenuating circumstances that made them complete fewer tasks than normal. Although such issues would presumably be randomized across the male and female groups, it is not possible to rule out if this was a factor in their completion rates. Future research efforts should allow respondents to note any events that may have impeded their progress.

Nonetheless, it is hoped that this preliminary investigation provides insights into the creation and completion of students' to-do lists, and generates interesting discussions for future research.

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