Abstract
Consumers nowadays have easier and richer access to information about social others pursuing goals similar to their own (e.g., through a Fitbit device, the Endomondo mobile app, and stickK.com). This research shows that social information may not always be welcomed and explores the questions of when consumers avoid such information, why they avoid it, and the downstream motivational consequences of avoiding it. We found that people avoid information about social referents when they are in the middle of their goal pursuit journey (compared to when they have just begun or are about to complete their goal), to circumvent potentially negative comparisons—information about social referents who are relevant (pursuing the same goal), proximal (in the same stage of goal pursuit), and superior. We use the frequency of head turns, eye movements, and consumers’ direct choices in the lab and in the field to document a U-shaped pattern of information avoidance behavior, which paradoxically contributes to the “stuck in the middle” phenomenon. Our findings connect the information avoidance literature with the psychophysics of goal pursuit and shed light on the questions of when and why people may be undermining their goal pursuit by avoiding relevant, motivating social information.

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