Reviewer’s report

Title: What influences the selection of contextual cues when starting a new routine behaviour? An exploratory study

Version: 0 Date: 03 Dec 2019

Reviewer: Harm Veling

Reviewer's report:

Dear Editor,

Below is my review of the manuscript Stawartz and colleagues. I think the manuscript is very well-written and reports an interesting study on how people select cues to remember a healthful behavior. I must admit that I am not very familiar with qualitative research, so I cannot evaluate the quality of this part of the study (to give an example, I had to resist the urge to count the occurrence of certain aspects to see how much this would support the conclusion, but I guess this is not how it works). I do have some comments that the authors may address when they think it would improve the quality of the manuscript.

I found it hard to understand whether and how the authors disentangle effort from visibility. They may often be confounded, but of course not necessarily. It would be helpful when the authors would more clearly distinguish between effort and visibility, also in light of work suggesting a causal role of visual attention in determining choices (e.g., see work by Krajbich, I., Armel, C., & Rangel, A. (2010). Visual fixations and the computation and comparison of value in simple choice. Nature neuroscience, 13(10), 1292.). And do participants usually conflate the two or do they sometimes distinguish between these two aspects (effort versus visibility)?

Previous work suggests that presenting a reminder of an important goal at the point of choice may increase the probability that people will act in line with their goal (e.g., Papies & Hamstra, 2010; Health Psychology; Papies & Veling, Appetite, 2013). Is this a strategy that participants did not use at all (e.g., write a note and put it on the fridge to remind oneself about the intention to take the pill)? I also wondered whether and how this work was relevant to the current research question.

Moreover, the paragraph on page 15 (starting with Overall…) made me think how the authors view their work in light of the boosting approach to behavior change (see work by Hertwig, R., & Grüne-Yanoff, T. (2017). Nudging and boosting: Steering or empowering good decisions. Perspectives on Psychological Science, 12(6), 973-986.), and self-nudging. For instance, do they think their work provides insights into cues that work well, and that recommendations can be made to people who want to change their behavior. Or, would it be better to search the literature for cues that have been shown to work (e.g., Papies & Hamstra, 2010), and inform people about those kind of cues that have been shown effective (a caveat here is that it is an empirical question whether the goal cues still work when participants are informed about them). Of course, a combination is also possible. In any case, I would find it interesting when the authors could discuss this issue in somewhat more depth to increase understanding of how their study may aid development of more effective behavior change interventions.
Page 8: If possible, it would be interesting to see images of all the participants and how well they correspond to their cue statements.

Page 14: Final sentence of the first paragraph of the discussion section seems very strong to me. How strong is the evidence to conclude this?

Page 14: instead of optimism bias people may also lack the competence (or creativity) to come up with a better idea.

Signed review,
Harm Veling

Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.
Yes

Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.
Yes

Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?
If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.
Not relevant to this manuscript

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