

Researchers explains how streaks motivate us

March 10 2024, by Andrew Sharp



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Friends out for a drink have hatched many a bright idea, but these insights (or what feel like insights at the time) don't usually end up published in academic journals. For researchers Jackie Silverman and Alixandra Barasch, though, a trip to a brewery sparked an idea that has blossomed into multiple published papers.

Silverman, assistant professor of marketing at the University of Delaware's Alfred Lerner College of Business and Economics, is very interested in streaks and why people get so wrapped up in doing the same thing over and over (and keeping track of how long they can go).

Pro [baseball players](#), for example, play in hundreds of games each year, and quite a few end up playing thousands of games. Nobody notices that, but fans obsessed over Orioles shortstop Cal Ripken Jr., who suited up for 2,632 games in a row for the better part of 17 seasons. Ripken's all-time record propelled him into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Most of us will never put together a string like that, but we still compete with ourselves and others on more modest streaks, often prompted to do so by apps. At the time of their visit to the brewery a few years back, Silverman's husband had been religiously using the app Untappd to track his craft beer consumption. Mysteriously, though, he made no effort to do so that day.

"We were kind of giving him a hard time," Silverman said. But he explained it didn't seem that important anymore because he'd forgotten to track it the week before. "Alix and I being consumer psychologists were like, 'Well, that's weird. Why did your utility change just because you missed one?' And so that started us down this rabbit hole about thinking about how consumers track what they do ... (and how) inevitably ruining that record can have negative effects."

The two collaborated on a pair of papers digging into this phenomenon that were recently published in two different journals (one more, and they'll have a streak going). "[On or Off Track: How \(Broken\) Streaks Affect Consumer Decisions](#)," was published in April 2023 in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. A second paper called "[Hot streak! Inferences and predictions about goal adherence](#)," published in November in the journal *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*. For this

one, they were joined by Deborah Small, a professor of marketing at Yale. Further research by Silverman on patterns and prediction of future events is slated to be published soon in *Management Science*.

The first study explores how people are motivated by streaks. Think of apps like Duolingo, which trumpets user streaks to keep people disciplined with learning a new language, or fitness programs like Peloton, which use similar nudges to keep people exercising.

The researchers not only surveyed people about their app usage and how they felt about streaks, but got other participants using test apps that experimentally manipulated their streaks to see how they reacted.

The experiments confirmed that people are strongly motivated by streaks, even if the streak is a bit artificial (say, for example, Duolingo lets you "repair" a streak and then tell your friends it's still going strong). In fact, people come to care about the streak itself, rather than just motivated to reach their original goal.

"On the flip side, what we find is that when people break their streaks, that is especially demotivating, because not only have they missed out on some behavior that they like doing that they're tracking, but they also now have failed in the goal of keeping their streak alive," Silverman said.

People really care about this stuff, and companies are well aware of it. Some users complain when their streaks are ruined by app malfunctions, power outages or the like, and even lobby to have their streaks restored, the study noted.

Silverman and her collaborators concluded that streaks can be important for both consumers and companies. Consumers want to stick with a goal, and companies want to promote regular use of their product. Silverman

also suggests that apps might be well advised not to focus on broken streaks (notification email: "Hey, you broke your streak!"). Instead, they might want to offer alternate ways to keep streaks going, making it easier while still promoting the behavior.

"What counts as a streak is malleable," Silverman noted. This stood out in one experiment, when one set of participants could keep a streak going by playing two different kinds of games, while another set had to stick with a chosen game to get their streak counted. Even when their actual game playing was identical, those told they had intact streaks were much more motivated.

In the second paper, Silverman and company dug further into the psychology of how people think they will behave, and think others will behave, based on recent streaks. Previous research has looked at how people react to phenomena like a "hot hand," when an athlete seemingly can't miss a shot or a gambler is on a winning streak.

Silverman, by contrast, was curious about the psychology behind behavior that people actually can control, when they set goals like watching what they eat or exercising more.

In this study, the researchers asked people to imagine themselves in a number of hypothetical scenarios, like getting up when the alarm clock rings to meet a productivity goal. If people were told they had done that three mornings in a row, they were more confident they'd continue to meet the goal. If they had only done it at three random times in the past week—technically, the same level of success, but not a streak—they were more pessimistic. Participants felt the same way about how others would behave, too.

We intuitively feel that we have more commitment if we're on a streak, and this research underscores that. Silverman said there's potential for

further research as to whether this is actually the case, but noted the importance of self-perception in influencing how we act.

One way this [self-confidence](#) might influence behavior is that people could be less likely to seek outside help, like a nutritional coach for dieting, for example, the study finds. That could be a good thing if it helps you save money you don't need to spend, but it could also be a negative if you turn down help you actually need.

The research is also relevant to our expectations of others, whether that's a school keeping track of attendance records or a manager reviewing sales performance, Silverman said.

"I think it's important to document the fact that patterns can affect those inferences and decisions, so people have full information when they make those decisions," she said.

Whether streaks are a force for good, or a way for companies to manipulate people into unhealthy behavior, depends on the context, but Silverman sees the possible benefits. Researchers like Silverman can help us use that technology more thoughtfully.

"I think that by experimentally studying this and understanding the psychology behind it, and getting this information out there, then consumers can be more informed and ... maybe engaged in some self-reflection—'Why am I pursuing this streak?'" she said.

More information: Jackie Silverman et al, Hot streak! Inferences and predictions about goal adherence, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.obhdp.2023.104281](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2023.104281)

Jackie Silverman et al, On or Off Track: How (Broken) Streaks Affect Consumer Decisions, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2022). [DOI:](#)

[10.1093/jcr/ucac029](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucac029)

Provided by University of Delaware

Citation: Researchers explains how streaks motivate us (2024, March 10) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-03-streaks.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.