

Can copying your friends help you achieve your goals?

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Consumers often struggle to achieve self-set life improvement goals, but what if deliberately emulating the successful strategies used by their friends could help them?

A new paper published in the *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* shows that encouraging people to find and mimic [exercise](#) strategies used by their friends increases the amount of time people spent exercising relative to receiving an exercise [strategy](#) passively. In the study, Katie S. Mehr, Amanda E. Geiser, Katherine L. Milkman, and Angela L. Duckworth introduce the "copy-paste prompt," a nudge that encourages consumers to seek out and mimic a goal-achievement strategy used by an acquaintance.

Copy-paste prompts "are easy to implement, virtually costless, and widely applicable with the potential to improve outcomes ranging from healthy eating to [academic success](#)," the authors write in "Copy-Paste-Prompts: A New Nudge to Promote Goal Achievement."

Copy-paste prompts may be more effective than

other methods for bolstering goal achievement for several reasons: behaviors are more appealing when learned from observation, plus learning from models increases both a person's expectations of their own abilities and their likelihood of using information. However, consumers may not take full advantage of opportunities to observe and emulate others in their social network. In this case, copy-paste prompts may add value by helping consumers better take advantage of this resource. Plus, the information is more customized and goal relevant, since [consumers](#) select peers whose behavior they want to emulate.

In the authors' [longitudinal study](#), over 1,000 participants were asked how many hours they spent exercising in the last week and were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: the copy-paste prompt condition, a quasi-yoked control condition, or a simple control condition.

In the copy-paste prompt condition, participants read the following:

"In this study, we want to help you learn about an effective hack or strategy that someone you know uses as motivation to exercise. Over the next two days, we'd like you to pay attention to how people you know get themselves to work out. If you want, you can ask them directly for their motivational tips and strategies."

In the quasi-yoked control condition, participants read the following:

"In this study, we're hoping to help you learn about an effective hack or strategy that motivates people to exercise. Over the next two days, we'd like you to get ready to learn a new strategy to motivate you to exercise."

The participants who received the copy-paste prompt spent more time exercising the following week than participants assigned to either a quasi-

yoked or simple control condition. "The benefits of copy-paste prompts are mediated by the usefulness of the adopted exercise strategy, commitment to using it, effort put into finding it, and the frequency of social interaction with people who exercise regularly," the authors write.

Looking ahead, the authors write, "It may be that once a consumer learns to copy-paste in one domain (e.g., exercise), she will be able to apply this technique in a way that improves many other outcomes (e.g., retirement savings)."

More information: Katie S. Mehr et al, Copy-Paste Prompts: A New Nudge to Promote Goal Achievement, *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1086/708880](https://doi.org/10.1086/708880)

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