



JCR MANUSCRIPT REVIEW HISTORY 003-1 (REVIEWS)

Editor's Decision Letter

Thank you for submitting "This Product has Got to Help Me: The Role of Reduced Self-Efficacy Beliefs on Motivated Reasoning of Product Information" to JCR for publication consideration. Your manuscript was read by three reviewers, by an associate editor, and by me. The reviewers made arguments on the merits of the paper, and the associate editor evaluated the arguments, prioritized them, and made a recommendation. Their reports are attached to this letter. This letter gives you my decision and reasoning.

Consistent with the associate editor's excellent report, I am inviting a revision. Point 1 of the AE's report is the guideline I am endorsing. By explicitly framing the paper as an empirical test of the theorizing in the MacInnis and de Mello paper in the Journal of Marketing, whose hypotheses are really the same, you can produce a substantially shorter paper, in the vicinity of 15 - 20 pages, without loss of impact. Reviewer A was an important source of the rationale for favoring the shorter paper, so although this reviewer raises some interesting challenges to your conceptualization, you have license to plot a course that skirts these questions as long as the paper is a compact empirical test of ideas that have passed scrutiny elsewhere. Please take reviewer B's advice on the title – it does not scan as it stands. Reviewer C has written a tough review, and raised some really serious challenges to this work. I respect the critique sincerely. It pointed however to rejection and on balance I think this is a nice piece of operationalization that deserves a shot. There is much in reviewer C's report (and also in reviewer A's and B's) to keep you busy on another paper.

I thought reviewer A's observation that 'While the story is not a new one, it is worth hearing again,' is actually high praise because with old stories the telling is everything. Please preserve that quality in the revision.

If you decide to resubmit, please respond briefly (say 3 pages) to the reviewers in a separate document. Thank you for sending this paper to JCR and please let me know if there is anything ambiguous in this letter or in the reports.

Sincerely,



John Deighton

AE comments for the author(s)

This paper presents 3 experiments examining the issues that MacInnis and de Mello examined in their recent JM paper on hope. Although 2 (maybe 3) out of 3 reviewers liked aspects of the paper, their overall conclusion might best be described as a tepid call for a revision. After reading over the reviewer comments both before and after reading the paper myself, I have to say that I am the more positive voice here. There are three very doable things that the authors could do to get the paper published.

1. Write a shorter paper with more focus on the three studies and less theorizing. The hypotheses are sort of obvious and do not need to be so painstakingly stated. The 3 studies follow a logical progression and by putting a brief roadmap at the beginning of the paper (like the summary in the first full P on p32), you streamline the presentation. Also, much of the concluding section is a rehash of prior material. A paper 30 pages rather than 48 pages is clearly doable.
2. The authors have 3 interesting studies and they should focus on this strength rather than get overly focused on self-efficacy. The findings are consistent with other constructs that are related to self-efficacy, such as hope vs fear, risk seeking vs loss aversion, and self confidence. Frankly, I don't really care which of these is the "right" idea but I think that the authors ought to acknowledge that these ideas are related and that their intent is not to engage in the testing of rival hypotheses since the above are not rivals at all but different shades of the same thing. One way to go is to tie this more closely to the JM hope paper and position it as a nice empirical test of the ideas in that paper, as suggested by R1. The main point is that the manipulation altered people's estimates of their capability and probability of performing well in academics and this apparently motivated them to process information about a relevant product in self-serving ways. The authors show three ways that processing is altered and that each has an impact of overall evaluations of the product. I might also add that by being more agnostic about exactly which of the above ideas is most "true", you can probably save some more space.
3. The authors could do more with their measured self-efficacy scores. Although there are only two items, they seem pretty direct. As R1 and R2 suggest, by simply using that score as a manipulation check, you are throwing information away. Using the measured self-efficacy score as a covariate and/or in mediation analyses makes sense.

Additional comments:

1. The mediation analysis on p22-23 is inadequately described. I would think that you would want to include the measured self-efficacy measure in an ANCOVA in study one and maybe do the full-blown mediation analysis.
2. H6 is awkwardly presented as discussed by R3. My first reaction was to go study 1 and plot the +/- information search results by low and high efficacy. Those results are not in line with your hypothesis, mainly because you are implicitly assuming that people only get to see all + or all – information, though you don't state this explicitly in your narrative. After the fact, it does make sense, but you need to do something to avoid this confusion.

In sum, I recommend: a substantially shorter paper; a possible repositioning of the paper as a follow up to the hope paper; an admission of agnosticism over whether it is self-efficacy, hope vs. fear, risking seeking versus loss aversion, or self-confidence that is the trigger for S's to engage in motivated reasoning; and better utilization of the measured self-efficacy score. I don't think that any of this should be all the difficult to pull off. Good luck.

Reviewer A

Comments for the author(s)

One of the most robust findings to emerge from studies of human inference over the years is the tendency for people tend to “see what they want to see” in people and objects. Perhaps because it is potentially so dysfunctional, the bias has received no shortage of research attention over the years, such as in attempts to explain the persistence of stereotypes (e.g., Kahneman and Tversky 1973) confirmation biases in hypothesis testing (Klayman and Ha 1987), and, most relevant to this paper, the prevalence of “wishful thinking” (e.g., MacInnis and de Mello 2005). In this paper the authors take up the question of why some individuals are more prone to this bias than others, focusing on the particular case of inferences about products of uncertain quality. They hypothesize that the answer may lie in variation in perceptions of self-efficacy, or the degree to which people believe that the goals they hold for themselves (e.g., being healthy) are deterministically achievable through current actions (e.g., exercising, taking vitamins). The authors hypothesize—and report evidence—that confirmatory reasoning biases will be most acute when perceptions of efficacy are diminished (e.g., people feel ill and can do nothing about it), but a product is presented that holds the potential promise of restoring efficacy (e.g., a magic pill).

How new is this insight? This is not entirely clear. On the surface, the core ideas and hypotheses closely parallel those described by MacInnis and de Mello (2005) in their work on instilled hope. Like the current authors, MacInnis and de Mello propose that when uncertain new products are introduced that could potentially allow a consumer to attain some previously unattainable goal—be it weight loss or great test scores—reasoning becomes biased in favor of confirming a hypothesis that the product can indeed achieve this, regardless of reality. The main difference seems to be one of labeling; where MacInnis and de Mello speak of “hope”, the current authors speak of “desires to repair low self efficacy”. While there may be an important theoretical distinction between these approaches, it is not one that is fleshed out in the paper. The hypothesized effects are also similar in many cases to what would be predicted by other,

more mundane, mechanisms. For example, in the current work the core “self efficacy” manipulation can also be seen as a hedonic loss/gain manipulation, which would predict many of the same behaviors. For example, in study 1, a student subject studying for finals who reads a paragraph telling them that stress causes memory loss would almost certainly have the effect of putting them in a hedonic loss state, feeding their fears that they might do poorly. It then follows that they act risk-seeking when asked to evaluate products that could possibly save them—displaying positive priors and engaging in confirmatory hypothesis testing. While such a story is probably no more insightful than the one the authors tell, it is also not clear that it is any worse—something that makes the reader question whether the “self efficacy” mechanism is this really getting to the heart of why subjects behaved as they did.

Along these same lines, I wished the authors had gone a bit deeper into theorizing *why* reduced self-efficacy would produce biased product-information searches. At issue here is whether the positive evaluations subjects had about target products were a consequence of the biased information searches or the biased searches were a consequence of positive priors. In this latter case then the finding could be much less interesting, since the goal of the information search may not have been to gather information relevant to forming an opinion but rather something more pragmatic, like where one can buy the product, how often to use it, etc.—the information one needs to gather if one has an intention to buy it.

On the more positive side, while the theoretical ideas may be familiar, the experimental evidence is certainly new, and, at worst, represents a contribution by demonstrating that the effects MacInnis and de Mello spoke of were real. While the experiments, taken individually, are not without problems, the body of evidence they offer is rather convincing that people who look to products as a means of restoring self efficacy—or with feelings of hope—indeed are prone to see what they want to see in them, something is both interesting and has obvious policy implications. While the story is not a new one, it is worth hearing again.

So, to be honest, I am a bit uncertain what to recommend on this paper. One possibility stand back from the claims of making new theoretical advances and covert this to a short, 15-page, empirical test of earlier theoretical ideas, in particular those described in MacInnis and de Mello (2005). Whether the appropriate outlet for such a paper is JCR (versus, say, *Marketing Letters*) is another issue, one that would seem more of an editor’s call. On the other hand, if the authors can make a convincing case that their ideas are indeed significantly new then a full-length paper could be supportable. The problem there, of course, is that new experiments would seem needed to empirically resolve the theoretical differences; i.e., that “restored self efficacy” is not simply a more awkward way of saying “hope” or a new illustration of risk-seeking in the face of losses. This would obviously be the much tougher road to go down, but, as always, the higher payoff it were achievable.

Below are some more specific issues the authors should address should a revision be undertaken:

Page 8, bottom. The first eight pages provide a nice review of a number of related literatures, but I am still unsure what new is being contributed here beyond a new way of labeling an effect that a number of others have hypothesized. Does viewing motivated

reasoning through the lens of self-efficacy allow one to explain some particular phenomena that were previously not well understood?

Figure 1. Drop this from future versions; it communicates little beyond what is in the text.

Page 11. H1, H2, and H3 seem to all be one hypothesis; i.e., the presumed reason *why* people search for more information from the product-favorable source (H1) is because they think it is credible (H2), and, given that H1 and H2 are true, H3 has to follow; if they are primarily reading product-favorable sources, they should also walk away with a favorable evaluation (H3). If you insist they are separate, you need to explain how one element of (H1, H2, H3) could be true and the others false (other than measurement error).

Page 13. What was the nature of the information Ss saw about the product in the brochure versus the newspaper? The brochure, I take it, offered a positive view of the product while the newspaper balanced? As suggested above, do you have an information about why low self-efficacy subjects read the brochures? Was it to form an impression of effectiveness or to learn about specifics of use, cost, etc.—things that matter more given a stronger prior need for the product.

Page 14. Manipulation check. Given that the manipulation measures were taken from the same subjects in the task, you are losing information about individual differences by analyzing it as an ANOVA with the prior labeling of levels. You should at least report what happened when you analyze the data using the self-efficacy scales as a continuous covariate.

Page 14, bottom. The two t-tests you report imply that there were sizeable differences in heterogeneity in reading rates between the two sources; the second t has a mean difference of .81 with a t of .77 (large variance) while the first has a mean difference of 1.95 with a t of 4.4 (small variance). Was it that there were a number of subjects in the low self-efficacy group who, in fact, read ONLY the newspaper?

A stronger test might be to focus on the individual *proportion* of time spent looking at the two sources rather the raw number.

Page 18. Drop parts b of H4 and H5; one does not hypothesize a null effect (though it sure would make science easier if we could!)

Reviewer B
Comments for the author(s)

I must admit that I got off on the wrong foot with a title I couldn't fathom. I guess you meant "got to" or "help" but not both. Also the phrase which appears in several places, "motivated reasoning OF product information" doesn't make sense to me. Maybe it should be "motivated reasoning APPLIED to product information." Once, I got by these hurdles, I found the paper to be well written and interesting.

I agree with the basic premise that understanding the role of consumer self-efficacy would be important, especially for products like diet plans, vitamins or memory enhancers. The hypotheses about how information is searched for and evaluated when considering such products seem reasonable and straightforward. Now I'll jump to the bottom line. I found your way of manipulating self-efficacy in all three studies to be indirect, convoluted and thus possibly not very generalizable. First, participants were asked to evaluate the abstract of a journal article on the role of stress on brain performance; then they were asked to participate in a "different" study about academic achievement; and then they were asked to participate in another study evaluating a new product. Who knows what extraneous thoughts and feelings were conjured up at each successive stage?

My own take on how to best achieve the worthwhile goals of this study are:

1. Consider self-efficacy as an important individual difference variable. Find the best scale of self-efficacy and administer it to consumers who evaluate a particular product along the lines you suggest. Then see to what extent self-efficacy predicts product evaluations. Admittedly, this correlational approach lacks the power of an experimental study and requires a larger number of subjects, but it would provide the most direct test of your conceptual model.
2. Use the experimental approach to manipulate self-efficacy and measure it along the lines you did, but then use these scores to test the mediational role of self-efficacy on product information search and evaluation. This would be like the test you describe on p. 22 but turned around. As it is, I think you're wasting valuable information by using your self-efficacy measure only as a manipulation check.

Again, I see the goals of this study as worthwhile and my basic question is whether your current methods are the most direct and generalizable way to achieve them.

Reviewer C
Comments for the author(s)

The main idea of this paper is that consumers who find their self-efficacy threatened may turn to transformational actions (buying and using products) to solve a problem they are currently facing and restore their self-efficacy. However, their goal of restoring self-efficacy will not be achieved if they conclude that a product is not useful in solving the problem. Therefore, motivated by the need to restore their self-efficacy, consumers will rate products as effective in solving their problem, more so than other consumers who don't face any threats to their self-efficacy.

The theoretical formulation advanced by the authors is fairly plausible. It is possible that consumers whose self-efficacy is threatened may find alternative ways of resolving the situation before they buy products (see discussion on p.6 and p.7). However, the fact that several 'sham' products are selling in the marketplace, and there are people who buy them, suggests that self-efficacy management could potentially be an interesting explanation for this behavior. Thus, this paper could have much impact in this area of research.

There are some problems, however, in the conduct of studies that pose serious threats to the internal validity of this research. I explain those problems below.

Concerns with the studies

The self-efficacy manipulation is not clearly described. Would telling students that stress impairs their performance in cognitive tasks reduce their perceived self-efficacy? If this were true, then would telling students that stress enhances their cognitive performance increase their perceived self-efficacy? The authors are not clear in explaining why they chose a particular manipulation and how it would affect one's self-efficacy. It is not clear whether participants found this information to be credible, especially when it says that stress enhances cognitive performance. It is also not clear whom such information should affect. Would only those that perceive themselves to be under stress be affected by this? How was that controlled in the study?

Further, if the manipulation works because those under stress are affected by it, then is self-efficacy needed as an explanation for this study? Wouldn't one argue that by telling the respondents that stress impairs their academic performance, their interest in stress-relieving products was enhanced, and therefore, they looked for solutions to this problem? This is consistent with the finding that one group searched for more information than the other, irrespective of whether it was deemed to be a partial source or impartial source. In fact, the overall pattern of the results is consistent with the argument that one group thought stress is a problem while the other did not. I am not sure where self-efficacy is involved in this.

Study two tries to address this problem by having the participants rate a different (not relevant to the study) product and showing no differences in their ratings of that product. This technique does not address the confound that one group finds the information more relevant to them while the other does not. The relevance is obviously product specific.

The authors might counterargue by saying that the increased attention being paid by the low self-efficacy consumers should result in greater discrimination of low vs. high credibility arguments. They find the reverse to be true in study two. But their manipulation of self-efficacy could produce exactly this kind of a pattern. The high self-efficacy group has been told that stress is good. So, any product that is a stress reliever would be analyzed more critically by them. For people who want to reduce the negative effects of stress, any solution is better than no solution (see H7 which suggests something similar). Thus, they may be less discriminatory in analyzing information. The main issue is that the motivation is reduce the effects of stress, and not to address self-efficacy concerns. The idea that consumers will experience higher self-efficacy after consuming the advertised product is not studied in this research.

The authors create significant confusion in this paper with H6. According to this hypothesis, low self-efficacy consumers are argued to require fewer pieces of positive information before they arrive at a decision. Contrast this with H1, where the authors hypothesize that low self-efficacy consumers should search for more pieces of information from a positive source. Clearly, they contradict each other. Further, the authors hypothesize in H6 that low self-efficacy consumers 'require' more negative pieces of information. I don't understand why low self-efficacy consumers seek out negative information, which is what this hypothesis seems to suggest. The process leading to this type of behavior should be clarified.

In sum, the authors start off with a very interesting hypothesis that people with low perceived self-efficacy bias their information processing in favor of objects that will restore their self-efficacy. Unfortunately, the manipulation of self-efficacy used in this research is questionable. It is not clear whether the authors manipulated perceived relevance of a product or self-efficacy. The hypotheses appear contradictory (see H1 vs. H6), and the results are open to alternative explanations. The authors should:

- Be more clear about the main construct, self-efficacy, as used in this research
- Employ more conventional manipulations of self-efficacy even though they involve the process of false feedback
- Show the effects of the manipulation on perceived self-efficacy but not on other variables that may covary
- Show biased information search that is consistent with their hypotheses
- Answer questions on how people with high self-efficacy would respond and why
- Show that self-efficacy is restored after the hypothesized behaviors take place.

If all of these issues were addressed, the paper would be interesting.