Self-efficacy and Individual Performance – Lessons from Marketing Research

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Abstract: Changing certain behaviors or enabling a desired performance constitutes important interdisciplinary issues with practical impact at economic, social and individual level. Many of the models used to understand and predict consumer behavior (such as TPB) propose that intention alone poorly predicts performance of a behavior and is needed a certain amount of control, abilities or skills. The concept of self-efficacy is particularly interesting in understanding human performance (or the lack of it) due to its context specificity, its importance on actual performance and its flexibility, as individuals can easily improve on it. The aim of this paper is to highlight several important marketing research findings around the concept of self-efficacy and draw from them lessons for the individuals and managers that could enhance their task performance and that of the people they are managing or working with. The current findings picture sometimes self-efficacy as a mediating variable for performance, some other times as a moderating factor in tackling constraints on behavior. However, in spite of some diverging perspectives in behavior modelling, the marketing research studies highlight important ways in which individuals could use the concept of self-efficacy in improving their performance, through awareness.

Keywords: self-efficacy; consumer behavior; individual task performance; brand promise

JEL Classification: D83; M31

1. Introduction

Individuals are constantly involved in changing their behavior, whether we speak of behaviors directly linked to economic activity (like buying and using products and services) or other types of behavior that all might have an economic dimension (like giving money for charity, recycling, or having more initiative in the workplace, just to give a few examples). Consumer behavior literature provides several models that account the main factors that determine enactment, most frequently tested taking an internal perspective and focusing on the psychological factors of the individual. One of the internal factors that received most of the attention is motivation, equated as intention with attitudes and internalized social norms as its main antecedents. However, another important factor for individual behavior was recognized in possessing the abilities, skills and control to perform that action and this paper will focus on this important factor and the findings provided by marketing research.

Whether a person has the ability to perform a certain action was conceptualized in certain models as perceived behavioral control (in TPB, Ajzen, 1991) or as locus of control or as self-efficacy (as proposed in MOA model, Olander and Thogersen (1995)). Even though some skills can be measured objectively,
all above concepts related to ability take on a subjective perspective. This perspective is highly important as people with similar skills (as measured objectively) aren’t always capable of enacting similar behaviors. Self-efficacy is a concept that was frequently used in marketing research and has several features that make easy to study but also easy to improve on, as several findings show.

2. Consumer Behavior and Self-Efficacy – the Theoretical Background

The subjective perspective on the abilities involved in behavioral performance is recognized by Ajzen (1991) who distinguishes the actual behavioral control, consisting of the available resources and opportunities of an individual, from the perception the individual has on his/her own control. This perception impacts strongly the intentions held and actions undertaken and has a higher psychological influence than the actual control. In other words, individuals form initiatives and enact the behaviors they believe they can perform or accomplish, while these beliefs might be according to reality or not. This the belief of the individual about what he/she determines what he/she can actually do.

Self-efficacy is a concept proposed by Albert Bandura (1977, 1982) that is used in models of consumer behavior as a proxy for subjective perception of the ability to perform an action. Self-efficacy refers to the individual’s own judgment about how capable he/she is in performing a certain behavior. Bandura (1982) asserts that the beliefs of self-efficacy are learnt (acquired) in several ways such as personal experience (positive and negative) and the example of others. This belief of own self-efficacy will influence whether a person will try a certain activity, the degree of perseverance on that activity in the face of challenge, as well as the final result – the performance of the behavior.

3. Self-efficacy in Marketing Research

There are many studies that have examined self-efficacy in context specific situations rather than general and suggested that measuring self-efficacy makes sense mostly in specific situations (Gist & Mitchell, 1992; Abusabha & Acterberg, 1997). Thus, many researchers named the self-efficacy concept according to the context they studied such as: physical activity self-efficacy (Giacobbi, Hauserblas, & Penfield, 2005; Sylvia-Bobiak & Caldwell, 2006), recreational self-efficacy (Hoff & Ellis, 1992), computer self-efficacy (Durnell & Haag, 2002; Hill, Smith, & Mann, 1987) self-efficacy in healthy eating (Gaugban, 2003) or self-efficacy in breast feeding (Wells, Thompson, & Kloehlen-Tarver, 2006).

Kim and Kim (2005) investigated in their study the influence of subjective factors on individual intention to purchase in e-commerce and explored the relationships between online transaction self-efficacy and consumer trust and perceived risk, respectively, when in turn determine the purchase intention. Thus, in this study self-efficacy is an important factor explaining behavioral motivation and individual choice, contributing positively to building trust and negatively to perceived risk.

The research of Hung and Petrick (2012) explored the role of several factors on the intention to travel, among which self-efficacy was studied as a moderating variable on constraints negotiation. This study tackles the issue of individual involvement in the face of challenge by testing the role of self-efficacy in finding solutions for diminishing the constraints in achieving certain behaviors.

Starting from the idea that the belief in one’s capability to perform a certain behavior is mediated by self-efficacy, Park and John (2014) proposed and tested whether brands could influence self-efficacy through the proposed benefits. They use four experimental studies to test this possibility.
4. Implications for Personal and Business Development

One of the most important implications of these studies is the fact that individuals could use the concept of self-efficacy in improving their performance whether we speak of choice and purchase contexts, or situations where a certain level of effort and involvement is needed, such as the workplace.

5. Conclusions

Marketing research in consumer behavior can be a valuable source of information for individuals looking to improve their performance in all kinds of life contexts. The study of consumer behavior is most of the time about mundane activities, almost of no interest for the individual. However, identifying influences in such everyday contexts is certainly used by companies trying to influence behavior, to convince us to buy something new or more of a certain thing. And they are successful since they identify small tricks that can be used to influence behavior. These small tricks could be used by consumers themselves as a tool to improve on certain tasks or as guidance for following their own interest more consciously. Starting from this perspective, the current paper aimed to highlight some of these tricks in connection to individuals’ abilities to perform certain actions and behaviors.

6. References


