Goal-Motivated Reasoning: the Lure of the Ayes, I Can@ Conclusion

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Both anecdotal evidence and experimental research have made us aware of the fact that we, as decision makers, often behave in ways that suggest the existence of prejudice, partiality, and other such biases that tend to lead us to a favored conclusion. Previous research in consumer behavior has shown how prior attitudes toward products affect the processing product information, analyzing the phenomenon within the motivated reasoning paradigm (i.e., Jain and Maheswaran 2000). Still, the scope of motivated cognitions is not limited to brand loyalty effects or existing product attitudes.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Both anecdotal evidence and experimental research have made us aware of the fact that we, as decision makers, often behave in ways that suggest the existence of prejudice, partiality, and other such biases that tend to lead us to a favored conclusion. Previous research in consumer behavior has shown how prior attitudes toward products affect the processing product information, analyzing the phenomenon within the motivated reasoning paradigm (i.e., Jain and Maheswaran 2000). Still, the scope of motivated cognitions is not limited to brand loyalty effects or existing product attitudes.

In the present research, we propose that certain forms of consumer motivated reasoning stem from strong drives derived from the pursuit of personally relevant goals, and that these motivated cognitions manifest themselves in the search and processing of product information, and in the formation of product attitudes. In particular, our research shows that these motivated cognitions help explain sometimes paradoxical behaviors—instances in which consumers make decisions that are not necessarily warranted by the information available to them in their environment.

Specifically, we propose the pursuit of a goal, and more in particular, the inherent desire individuals have to perceive their goals as attainable, are situational factors that affect consumer cognitive processes in the evaluation of products.

In a series of experiments we show that, when placed in situations where goal attainability is put into question, consumers resort to products that claim to make the target goal achievable. Then, the more critical the product is for goal attainment (i.e., the fewer alternative pathways to goal attainment the individual has) the more motivated the consumer is to evaluate the product as potentially effective. In order to reach this favorable product evaluation, the consumer gathers and processes product information in a biased manner, so as to arrive to the desired conclusion of goal attainability. The pursuit of a favored conclusion fits squarely within the motivated reasoning paradigm (Kunda 1990), in which individuals are driven by a need for specific closure (Kruglanski 1990). In our model, goal-pursuing consumers—particularly those lacking confidence regarding the attainability of their goals—engage in goal-motivated reasoning in order to arrive at the conclusion that their goal is attainable. These consumers select cognitive processing strategies and generate beliefs that help them convince themselves that their behavior (i.e., purchasing and consuming a product or service that supposedly is a means to goal attainment) is rationally justified. We provide supporting evidence to our model in three studies that have been conducted so far.

Study 1 provides evidence suggesting that, even in the presence of minimum product information, consumers who lack confidence regarding goal attainability (vs. those who have higher confidence) develop more favorable attitudes toward products that present themselves as means to goal attainment. Furthermore, we find a two-way interaction of attainability confidence and number of product alternatives, indicating that the incidence of goal-motivated reasoning is exacerbated as the number of available alternatives becomes smaller, because in such cases concluding that a particular goal-related product is effective becomes more critical.

Study 2 delves into the information search and evaluation process, and provides evidence suggesting that goal-motivated consumers assign lesser diagnosticity to negative goal-related product information than do non-motivated consumers. In a product information search task, participants lacking confidence about goal attainability required a larger amount of product-unfavorable information to conclude that the product was ineffective, compared to participants high in attainability confidence. Furthermore, and despite looking up more pieces of product-unfavorable information, participants low in attainability confidence formed less negative product attitudes than did participants high in attainability confidence.

Lastly, Study 3 shows that goal-motivated individuals exhibit a bias towards sources of information that are likely to be supportive of their favored conclusion (namely, that the product in question is effective). When given the choice of two sources of information differing in objectivity and product-favorability (i.e., a product brochure, and a newspaper article about the product), participants lacking in goal attainability confidence favored the product-favorable source (i.e., product brochure) over the impartial and potentially product-unfavorable source (i.e., newspaper article), while participants high in attainability confidence exhibited a more even-handed choice of information sources.

This research makes three main contributions to the consumer behavior literature: first, it describes instances in which consumer attitude formation is top-down (i.e., driven by personally-relevant goals) rather than bottom-up (i.e., driven by product information). Second, the goal-motivated reasoning model can lead to predictions that are quite different from what would be expected by traditional information processing models that assume impartial or non-motivated processing. Third, it identifies a novel set of antecedents to motivated reasoning: goal relevance, and a-priori confidence that the goal can be achieved. Significant implications can be derived from the present findings: results show that goal-pursuing consumers who lack confidence in goal attainability are inherently more prone to forming favorable attitudes toward products that present themselves as means to goal attainment, both in the presence of minimum information (i.e., simple product claims) and when information from different sources is at hand. As a corollary, it follows that consumers may make low-quality decisions regardless of the quality of the available information, and that consumers’ vulnerability to certain marketing practices is at least as much a function of situational variables (i.e., boost confidence in goal attainability) as it may be of traditional demographical markers.