Personal Control and Perceived Product Efficacy

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We demonstrate that low (vs. high) personal control increases perceived product efficacy. This phenomenon represents a combination of strategies to regain control: Efficacious products are external sources of control, and perceiving greater efficacy thus implies using an external source to bolster one’s own ability to bring about desired outcomes.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A growing stream of research examines how individuals cope with the common experience of reduced personal control (e.g., Chen, Lee, and Yap 2016; Cutright 2012; Cutright and Samper 2014). Compensatory control theory (CCT; Kay and Eibach 2013) proposes that behavior following a loss of control is driven by two basic motivations: bolstering a sense of agency, and affirming structured and predictable relationships in the world. In turn, four strategies serve these two motivations (Landau, Kay, and Whitson 2015). The present research builds on the two strategies for bolstering agency, which are (1) affirming beliefs about personal agency or ability, and (2) affiliating with external entities that can act on the self’s behalf. Specifically, we build on prior work showing that control-deprived consumers evaluate products more favorably when those products have characteristics fitting the motivation to affirm personal agency (i.e., “strategy 1”). For example, products requiring effort are evaluated more favorably because using them is empowering (Cutright and Samper 2014), and utilitarian products are evaluated more favorably because they are associated with problem-solving (Chen et al. 2014).

Extant research has not examined the possibility that products can serve as external sources of control (i.e., “strategy 2”); research in this strategy focuses on cultural sources of control (e.g., religion and governments; Kay and Eibach 2013). However, because “efficacious products” (e.g., performance-enhancers, detergents, and pharmaceuticals) can be seen as external entities that act on a user’s behalf in order to bring about a desired outcome (e.g., successful performance, a clean home, and relief from ailments, respectively), it may be possible for control-deprived consumers to rely on such products as external sources of control.

In line with CCT, we thus propose that consumers experiencing low control seek external aids that can help them achieve their goals and reaffirm their ability to bring about desired outcomes. As efficacious products can help users reach desired outcomes, we hypothesize that low (vs. high) personal control increases perceived product efficacy. Moreover, as this is driven by control-deprived consumers’ motivation to use the product in order to reach a desired outcome, this effect combines “strategy 2” and “strategy 1” (Landau et al. 2015) in the sense that reduced control leads consumers to give more credit to the external source (by perceiving greater efficacy) because this helps consumers accomplish desired outcomes through their own actions. This implies that the effect of personal control on perceived product efficacy should be moderated by the personal relevance of a product for achieving desired outcomes.

We tested these predictions in two studies and find support for our proposed process. Study 1 provides initial evidence through a 2 (personal control: low vs. high) x 2 (self-affirmation: neutral vs. affirmation) between-subjects design in which 98 Mturk respondents participated. As self-affirmation reduces the need to compensate for low personal control (Whitson and Galinsky 2008), we hypothesized that participants feeling low (vs. high) personal control would perceive a product as more effective, but this effect would be attenuated by an opportunity to self-affirm. To test this, participants were led to believe that they would utilize a performance-enhancing treatment (listening to music by Mozart) to assist their performance on a task, and we measured participants’ expectations for the effectiveness of the music at improving performance. As expected, we found a significant 2-way interaction (p<.05) such that low (vs. high) personal control increased perceived efficacy in the neutral affirmation condition (p<.05) but not the self-affirmation condition (F<1).

Study 2 built on these findings by manipulating the personal relevance of the product under consideration, such that half the participants believed the product under consideration would be used for an upcoming task, whereas the other half merely reported efficacy perceptions without expecting to consume the product or perform the task. Thus, 209 undergraduates were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (personal control: low vs. high) x 2 (expectation of consumption and performance: absent vs. present) between-subjects design. Participants in the expectations-present condition were led to believe that they would consume an energy drink (“Neuro SONIC”) before completing a performance task, while those in the expectations-absent condition were simply informed that we were interested in their perception of the energy drink. We measured perceptions of product efficacy, as well as participants’ motivation to derive efficacy from the product in order to accomplish desired outcomes. We hypothesized that low (vs. high) personal control would increase perceived efficacy in the expectations-present condition only, and that motivation to derive product efficacy would mediate this effect.

Results confirmed our predictions. We found significant two-way interactions on both efficacy perceptions (p<.05) and motivation (p<.05), such that participants in the expectations-present condition perceived significantly greater efficacy, and were also significantly more motivated to derive efficacy, under low vs. high personal control (p<.05). Mediation analysis (Hayes 2013; Model 8) demonstrated that motivation mediated the effect of personal control on efficacy perceptions (95% CIs for both the two-way interaction and simple effects did not cross zero, and the direct effect of the two-way interaction on efficacy became nonsignificant when accounting for motivation).

Our research contributes to the personal control and product efficacy literatures. First, extant marketing research on products as sources of personal control has studied only evaluations of products, showing that products possessing characteristics associated with regaining agency are evaluated more favorably (Chen et al. 2016; Cutright and Samper 2014). We build on this work by showing that perceptions, not only evaluations, of products are impacted by personal control. Moreover, this effect is due to a combination of the strategies used to regain control: Control-deprived consumers perceive greater product efficacy because they are motivated to utilize external sources of control (“strategy 2”) in order to accomplish personally-relevant desired outcomes (“strategy 1”; Landau et al. 2015). In contrast, previous research has only shown that product evaluations are impacted by personal control due to “strategy 1.” Finally, we also contribute to the product efficacy literature by showing that personal control—a factor relating to consumers, rather than the product—impacts perceptions of product efficacy.

REFERENCES


