



Leading the way: Motivating environmental action through perceived marketplace influence



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ABSTRACT

This research explores the perceived marketplace influence (PMI) belief and its role in explaining behavior. Across three studies, we show PMI to be distinct from other efficacy-based constructs and a powerful predictor of pro-environmental and socially-motivated behavior. Specifically, consumers are motivated to act when they believe their behavior influences other marketplace actors. We develop a ten-item scale for PMI and display its predictive and incremental validity in explaining environmental behavior before showing its power to translate environmental concern into corresponding behavior. We then find that PMI predicts social environmentalism and environmental citizenship behaviors, and that these effects are attenuated by consumer skepticism of marketing. While complementing existing efficacy-related beliefs with its explicit marketplace focus, PMI provides an important tool for marketers operating in environmental and prosocial niches by allowing them to understand and target the consumers most likely to adopt their products or attempt to recruit others in environmentally-motivated efforts.

1. Introduction

Do the actions we take lead others to change what they do? Is the belief that our actions influence the behavior of others motivating enough to change our own behavior? When faced with complex environmental and social challenges like climate change and environmental degradation, consumers understandably question whether or not their daily actions carry enough weight to make a positive change in their world. However, if our actions represent an opportunity to influence others, these small, daily behaviors transform from isolated acts into a vehicle for triggering collective effort and change. Seen from this perspective, an individual's behavior contributes to solving complex societal issues while indirectly influencing others to do the same, thus amplifying the impact of and offering a rationale for one's actions. This research seeks to better understand and measure how perceived influence affects consumer preference and decision-making for environmentally-friendly consumption and activism behavior.

Most experts agree that a more equitable and sustainable future rests on the collective actions of society (see Stern, 2000 and Peattie, 2010 for reviews of the sustainable behavior literature). In interdependent fashion, however, the ability of this collective to positively

impact social and environmental issues relies on a consumer's inclination to engage in environmental and socially-motivated marketplace behavior, and vice versa. In support of this interdependent relationship, recent research shows that consumers act on their environmental concerns in the marketplace when they believe their actions influence other consumers and organizations to work for the same changes (Leary et al., 2014). In short, some consumers believe their behavior positively influences the actions of other marketplace actors. This perceived marketplace influence motivates consumers to follow through on their prosocial and pro-environmental inclinations when they judge their behaviors to provide immediate value for social change and instigate long-term collective effort.

Defined as “the belief that one's efforts in the marketplace can influence the marketplace behavior of other consumers and organizations, and inasmuch serve as a motivation for one's own behavior” (Leary et al., 2014, p. 1954), perceived marketplace influence (PMI) falls into a broader category of existing efficacy-based beliefs including self-efficacy (SE; Bandura, 1997), perceived consumer effectiveness (PCE; Ellen et al., 1991; Roberts, 1996), and collective efficacy (CE; Bandura, 2000; Illia et al., 2011). In general, these efficacy-related beliefs function as domain-specific cognitions that determine if

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circumstances support expending effort (Bamberg, 2003); when consumers believe their actions will lead to a desired outcome, they act on these beliefs. Though it shares some overlap with other efficacy-related beliefs, PMI uniquely focuses on the relevance of social influence in consumer action by connecting the self to both collective *and* organizational interests. In so doing, PMI provides a more comprehensive account of how consumers' ethical values and beliefs relate to marketplace behavior.

While the work on PMI from Leary et al. (2014) introduced the PMI construct and conceptually distinguished it from other efficacy-based beliefs, this initial foray into perceived influence left several important questions unanswered that the current work seeks to address. First, the current work moves beyond conceptual distinctions by empirically establishing the nomological relationship between PMI and related efficacy beliefs. Second, while the definition for PMI clearly outlines two distinct dimensions of the construct (i.e. one's perceived influence on other consumers and one's perceived influence on organizations), the three-item measurement for PMI in Leary et al. (2014) only indirectly captures these dimensions. We address this issue by developing and validating a scale to measure PMI and its two sub-dimensions: five items measuring the perception of influence on other consumers (PMI Consumer) and five items measuring the perception of influence on corporations and organizations (PMI Organization). Lastly, the current work assesses PMI's impact on a greater set of environmental and socially-motivated behaviors, offering a more generalizable account of its importance for understanding behaviors in these domains.

Across three studies, PMI is established as distinct from other efficacy-related beliefs and a powerful predictor beyond these beliefs for environmental and socially driven behavior. It is further shown that, when compared with other efficacy beliefs, PMI provides a more complete account for translating environmental values (i.e. environmental concern) into corresponding behavior. Finally, the current research establishes an initial boundary condition for perceived marketplace influence by exploring the attenuating effect of consumer skepticism.

Accordingly, this paper serves as a replication and extension of the initial work on perceived marketplace influence from Leary et al. (2014). Combining scale validation with theory development and empirical prediction, the present work addresses calls for research exploring how marketplace beliefs drive behavior (Dunning, 2007) while advancing our understanding of PMI in the family of efficacy-based beliefs, and its consequences for explaining, describing, and predicting consumer behavior. Building on these findings, the door opens for future research that digs even further into PMI's influence on general ethical behavior and the context-specific effects of the dual PMI dimensions.

2. Perceived marketplace influence

Beliefs serve as a key motivating factor for behavior. Indeed, several prevalent behavioral theories include beliefs as critical parts of their models. For example, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991) states that one's expectancy beliefs about a particular behavior inform attitudes toward that behavior, ultimately informing intention and behavior. These expectancy beliefs rely on personal assessments of subjective probability that the behavior in question will result in a particular consequence. When people believe that their behavior will produce a given outcome, they experience greater levels of personal efficacy, motivating them to act upon these beliefs. In this regard, individuals determine that acting upon a belief is worth the cost associated with that behavior, leading to greater action tendencies (Ertz et al., 2016).

Bamberg (2003) states that the behavioral beliefs held by an individual are driven in part by the context in which she or he operates; efficacy beliefs depend upon the situation and behavior in question (i.e. situation specific beliefs). Stated differently, individuals might believe

that their actions are likely to make a difference in one context, but not in other situations. This domain specificity is an important attribute of beliefs, with Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) noting that situation specific cognitions and beliefs directly determine particular behavior in a domain.

Building from the foundational role that situation specific beliefs play in determining behavior, Leary et al. (2014) introduced the concept of perceived marketplace influence (PMI), suggesting that the belief of influence on other marketplace actors motivates and justifies a consumer's decision to begin or continue behaving in an environmentally-friendly manner. As such, PMI is conceptualized as an efficacy-based expectancy belief with applications to any number of different consumer domains where consumers make judgments about the potential marketplace influence of a particular behavior. If a consumer views his or her behavior as leading to the desired outcome of influencing others, he or she is motivated to act upon that belief through behavior in the domain for which their influence is deemed operative. Given this domain specificity of the PMI motivation, the two dimensions of PMI (Consumer and Organization) could potentially differ in their effects on motivation and behavior depending upon context. It is important to note that this perception of influence is just that: a perception of the individual. Whether or not one's behavior actually changes what others do is largely inconsequential, as long as a consumer believes her or his actions do so.

While Leary et al. (2014) confined their work to environmental behavior, we expand the scope of PMI to explore how one's belief of perceived influence on others operates within a broader domain of environmental and social behaviors. Specifically, the outward-facing nature of PMI (e.g., people believe they are actively influencing other consumers and organizations) implies that its impact goes beyond conservation and purchasing behavior to other actions specifically intended to change the behavior of other marketplace actors, an implication supported by prior research. For example, Alexandrov et al. (2013) show that marketplace behavior is a socially embedded process and the result of a series of interactions among individuals. Consumers derive a number of personal and social benefits from these interactions and are likely to engage in social behavior, like word-of-mouth, when they believe their actions will benefit others (Sundaram et al., 1998).

Similarly, we propose that when consumers believe their marketplace behavior will influence the actions of other consumers and organizations, they will be motivated to follow through on that behavior, as higher perceived influence increases the desire to engage in behaviors that spread opinion and influence to others. For this research, we investigate PMI's influence on the behaviors of environmental citizenship and social environmentalism, whereby individuals use socially motivated behavior to influence the actions of other marketplace actors. With current social and environmental issues requiring collective action (Stern, 2000), this belief of perceived influence helps to connect individual level motivation with consumer behavior intended to impact the collective.

It is also possible that this perceived influence is affected by other consumer traits that would heighten or lessen its impact on behavior. In the current research we investigate the impact of consumer skepticism on perceived marketplace influence. As a more stable and less domain-specific marketplace belief, consumer skepticism plays a large role in shaping consumers' thoughts on how the marketplace operates and their subsequent marketplace behavior (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998). Indeed, research has found that consumers who are highly skeptical toward marketing activities are more distrustful of and less likely to attend to and rely on marketing information in their decision-making process (Obermiller et al., 2005). As such, increased skepticism regarding the underlying motives of marketing activities inhibits the effectiveness of marketing efforts (Vanhamme and Grobben, 2009), leading to unfavorable word-of-mouth and decreased firm equity (e.g. Skarmas and Leonidou, 2013).

When investigating perceived marketplace influence, it is possible

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