I hope to protect myself from the threat: The impact of self-threat on prevention-versus promotion-focused hope

Tae Rang Choi, Jung Hwa Choi, Yongjun Sung

ABSTRACT

This research explored the impact of self-threat on two types of hope, distinguished by regulatory focus: prevention hope versus promotion hope. Two experimental studies were conducted. The results of Study 1 indicated that individuals are more likely to focus on prevention hope when their self-view is threatened. Additionally, the findings in Study 1 were extended in the next experiment using an advertising context. Study 2 revealed that prevention hope-focused advertising messages were more persuasive (namely, advertising trust and the attitude toward both advertising and the brand) and inspired consumers’ behavioral intention (or purchase intention) more than promotion hope-focused advertising messages when self-threat occurred. The implications of the study’s findings and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

1. Introduction

People often say, “I hope” and then hope for trivial to crucial things in their everyday lives. They hope for such things as shiny hair, “cool” outfits, to be accepted by their preferred graduate school, receive pay raises, find a wonderful spouse, prevent cancer, or avoid their problems, among others. Thus, hope arises from the desire to attain a certain goal, and relates to goal outcomes (Poels & Dewitte, 2008). One way to attain our goals is through consumption, and consequently, we consume a variety of products or services to fulfill our goals.

Given its importance in our life in general, and consumption behavior in particular, marketing scholars have revealed that hope significantly impacts consumer behavior, marketing, and public policy (MacInnis & De Mello, 2005). In fact, products and services can evoke feelings of hope by providing a means to attain desirable outcomes (i.e., fashion items to achieve glamorous looks) or avoid negative outcomes (i.e., the local gym to prevent obesity). Lazarus (1999) and Snyder (2002) suggest that hope arises in both satisfactory and unsatisfactory situations. Hope arises in the latter with a goal to avoid negative consequences, whereas hope in the former can be associated with desirable accomplishments. As hope is relevant to individuals’ goal outcomes, the regulatory focus theory (RFT) can be employed to conceptualize two types of hope in the study: promotion hope versus prevention hope (Poels & Dewitte, 2008).

Social psychologists in previous years have been interested in the principles of self-regulation. According to the regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997), which builds on the general hedonic notion that people approach pleasure and avoid pain, two types of desired goals make people feel good or bad about the target object or behavior. The first type of goal involves achieving positive gains by focusing on “promotion.” The promotion-focused goal relates to attaining such positive outcomes as advancement, achievement, and aspirations. The other type of goal involves avoiding negative outcomes by focusing on “prevention.” The prevention-focused goal is illustrated in avoiding such negative outcomes as responsibilities, obligations, and security. Therefore, individuals with promotion-focused goals regulate their motives and behaviors toward positive outcomes, while those with prevention-focused goals regulate their motives and behaviors to avoid negative outcomes (Aaker & Lee, 2001). Prior research on self-regulation has demonstrated the impact of these two distinct regulatory foci on cognitive processes (Crowe & Higgins, 1997), emotional responses (Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997), and behavioral strategies (Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994).

Based on these theoretical underpinnings, Poels and Dewitte (2008) postulated that individuals with promotion hope strive to attain something positive (i.e., high in promotion and low in prevention), while those with prevention hope tend to avoid something negative (i.e., high in both promotion and prevention). Our research posits that threats to an important self-perception can temporarily shake an individual’s confidence, resulting in a choice of hope (i.e., promotion versus prevention) that can help the individual cope with decreased self-confidence. We predict in this study that hope can assume the form
of either pursuing desirable outcomes or avoiding those that are undesirable. Individuals may be especially likely to be inspired by prevention hope when they feel threatened or anxious, which simultaneously represents both promotion and prevention. Further, they may be inspired by promotion hope, which represents promotion only, without self-threat.

While prior research offers insights into the impact of hope on marketing, advertising persuasion, CSR activities, and consumer behavior (Kim, Kang, & Mattila, 2012; MacInnis & De Mello, 2005; Poels & Dewitte, 2008), it is still unclear how self-threat interacts with hope in determining how consumers respond to attain their goals. As a result, several theoretical and managerial issues remain unsolved regarding the relationship between self-threat and hope in marketing and advertising contexts. Threats to self-concept are undeniably of critical importance and relevance to both marketing researchers and practitioners. Individuals are potentially exposed to some form of threat in their everyday lives, such as physical pain, emotional distress, or psychological threats. When their self-perceptions are threatened, they take a variety of actions to cope with low confidence. For example, threats to the psychological self, such as making a bad product decision and feeling unattractive, may result in evoking hope to cope with such threats. Product or service consumption can be a way of handling such self-threats as individuals hope to attain their goals. This study fills this gap in literature and offers an enhanced understanding of self-threat and regulatory focus effects, in conjunction with hope in an advertising context. This thereby provides both theoretical and managerial insights regarding various marketing-related topics.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Hope

People express the emotions they experience in their everyday lives (Lee & Woo, 2017). As emotions are major life components, researchers have suggested that the emotions experienced impact the formation of attitudes (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994), memory (Cahill & McGaugh, 1998), assessments of life satisfaction (Kuppens, Realo, & Dieper, 2008), information processing (Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2004), and judgment and choice (Lerner & Keltner, 2000). Bagozzi, Gopinath, and Nyer (1999) defined emotions as an internal “mental state of readiness that arises from cognitive appraisals of events or thoughts; […] and may result in specific actions to affirm or cope with the emotion, depending on its nature and meaning for the person having it” (p. 184).

Psychologists have characterized experienced emotions by appraising valence. Individuals judge the appraisal of valence depending on whether the particular event is positive or negative, or feels pleasant or unpleasant (Schwarz, 1990). For instance, anger, sadness, fear, guilt, and anxiety are considered as negative valence, whereas enjoyment, happiness, liking, pride, and hope are considered as positive valence. Additionally, experienced emotions are conceptualized by arousal, or levels of certain heightened emotions; specifically, whether they feel quiet or active (Wundt, 1924).

Prior research, in reflecting emotions’ importance to individuals, has revealed that emotions also play a significant role in advertising persuasion, resulting in attitude formation (Malhotra, 2005) as well as cognitive and behavioral responses (Geuens, De Pelsmacker, & Faseur, 2011). Consequently, marketing scholars and consumer psychologists have explored diverse emotions in advertising and marketing contexts: regret (Tsios & Mittal, 2000), dissatisfaction (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2004), sympathetic and empathy (Escalas & Stern, 2003), and anger (Sharifi & Aghazadeh, 2016). Among various emotions, hope has recently received increasing attention from scholars, and has been researched in such contexts as marketing (MacInnis & De Mello, 2005), health communication (Chadwick, 2014), corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities (Kim et al., 2012), academic performance (Snyder, 2002), life significance (Feldman & Snyder, 2005), and advertising (Poels & Dewitte, 2008).

Hope is undeniably a common word used in everyday life. In an effort to conceptualize hope, Lazarus (1991) postulated that hope essentially arises when individuals desire to obtain a particular goal. Hope is formed from reality-based evaluations of volition and ways of fulfilling uncertain, goal-congruent outcomes (MacInnis & De Mello, 2005; Snyder et al., 1991). Specifically, hope is a future-oriented emotion because it focuses on actions and stems from outcomes that have not yet been achieved (Lazarus, 1991; Smith, Haynes, Lazarus, & Pope, 1993). Hence, Bagozzi, Baumgartner, Pieters, and Zeelenberg (2000) postulated that similar to fear and anxiety, hope involves anticipated emotional outcomes, and not experienced outcomes. Scholars address the emotional aspects of hope (e.g., Lazarus, 1991) based on appraisal theories, wherein accounting emotions are extracted from one’s assessments of a situation or stimuli. To experience feelings of hope, individuals should appraise a goal congruent to its outcomes (Lazarus, 1991; Roseman, 1991; Smith et al., 1993). Goal congruency in a satisfactory situation is represented by the occurrence of a favorable outcome, whereas goal incongruity under threatening circumstances involves avoiding or solving a negative outcome (MacInnis & Chun, 2007; Snyder, 2002). Additionally, hope can be experienced depending on how much the individual yearns for the outcomes. Literature that studies hope defines yearning as the degree of desire for a goal-congruent outcome, associated with the importance of both desirable outcomes and unfavorable circumstances (Lazarus, 1991; Stotland, 1969). Prior research indicates that hope is likely to be felt when desirable future outcomes are perceived as possibly occurring, but uncertain (Lazarus, 1991; Smith et al., 1993). Researchers have agreed over decades of study that hope is an emotion that is difficult to control, is a common experience, and motivates behavior (Averill, Catlin, & Chun, 1990; Bruininks & Malle, 2005).

MacInnis and Chun (2007) collect the identified components of hope to define it as a “positive emotion that varies as a function of the degree of yearning for a goal-congruent, future-oriented outcome, appraised as uncertain, yet possible.” Hope, in other words, is likely to be invoked when an individual’s desirable outcome is important, can possibly occur in the future, and is expected to be achieved, but is also uncertain. Two different hope-evoking situations have been proposed in considering the fundamental characteristics of hope relevant to long-term goal outcomes. Hope can be induced in unsatisfactory situations, in which withdrawal, deficiency, damage, or self-threats exist, as well as in satisfactory situations, if outcomes can potentially improve (Lazarus, 1999; Snyder, 2002). Specifically, hope can contribute to creating a goal of avoiding unfavorable circumstances or outcomes to escape from unsatisfactory situations; individuals might hope to reach a goal to accomplish desirable circumstances, or outcomes to enhance satisfactory situations.

Given goal congruence’s crucial role relative to the desired outcome to experience hope in compliance with circumstances, past hope research has applied either a promotion or a prevention focus (Pham & Higgins, 2005; De Mello & MacInnis, 2005). The current study parallels prior empirical research and follows previous scholars’ efforts to conceptualize hope (Kim et al., 2012; Poels & Dewitte, 2008) by relying on the well-established regulatory focus theory to distinguish the two types of hope. The following section discusses the regulatory focus theory, and the distinction between the two types of hope: prevention and promotion.

2.2. The regulatory focus theory and hope

Social psychologists over the years have been interested in the principles of self-regulation. The regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) builds on the general hedonic notion that as people approach pleasure and avoid pain, two types of desired goals exist that make people feel good or bad about the target object or behavior. The first
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