3 Why and how consumers hope

Motivated reasoning and the marketplace

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Aspirations to achieve desired states drive, directly or indirectly, all of human behavior. This most basic and fundamental of principles is at the core of our quest to understand the why of consumer behavior and what processes and purposes lie inside the external manifestations of consumption. Tightly intertwined with these aspirations is the concept of hope: consumers hope to lose weight and to look younger; they hope to have beautiful houses and fashionable as well as flexible wardrobes (Kaiser and Ketchum, this volume); they hope to find enlightenment, and they even hope to avoid death (Turley, this volume). The possibility of achieving such goals drives consumption as consumers buy products or services regarded as means to achieve these ends. Indeed, the shopping experience itself engenders hope that a new and better self is in the offing (Kaiser and Ketchum, this volume).

As would be expected of a notion so intimately linked to human aspirations, hope is a common word in everyday language. Research by Shimanoff (1984) finds that in everyday conversations, hope is one of the most frequently named emotions. Religions and spiritual philosophies across cultures advocate the importance of hope for the health of the mind, body, and soul. Paradoxically, despite its prevalence in language and consumer culture, and its relevance to consumer goals, the study of hope in the literature in marketing and psychology is limited. Indeed, over forty years ago, Cohen (1958) observed, “Although life without hope is unthinkable, psychology without hope is not, judging by the conspicuous absence of any study of hope from the literature” (10). The status of the study of hope has changed little in the interim; as Lazarus (1999a: 653) expounds, “With a modest number of exceptions ... there has been a great reluctance on the part of psychologists to address the concept of hope.” We surmise that the dearth of research on the topic is due to two factors: (1) historical conceptualizations of emotions that omit hope, and (2) lack of clarity in the definition of hope.

In the present chapter, we define the concept of hope using an appraisal theory perspective. This theory is particularly appropriate to the study of goals as it reflects consumers’ assessments of the impact of the environment on goal
achievement. Underlying the evocation of hope are appraisals that a future outcome is goal-congruent and possible. Complementing the use of appraisal theory, we also argue that the concept of hope can be studied in terms of its three "faces," specifically, (1) to hope, (2) to have hope, and (3) to be hopeful. To hope is to yearn for a goal-congruent outcome seen as possible; to have hope is to enjoy a positive feeling that such outcome is possible; finally, to be hopeful is to assign an expectation level to the possibility of the outcome. We elaborate on these distinctions later in the chapter as they relate to the depiction in Figure 3.1. Each "face" relates to the definition of hope, but focuses on a different aspect of the appraisal process. This chapter focuses on the second of these treatments of hope — to have hope. Consideration of the other two faces of hope are described elsewhere (e.g., MacInnis and de Mello 2005 focus on to hope; MacInnis et al. 2004 focus on being hopeful).

In the next sections, we expand on the topic of having hope, how this facet of the hope triptych is woven into consumption, and how having hope is linked to motivated information processing. We begin by defining having hope as it relates to the other two faces of hoping and being hopeful, encasing this definition in the framework of appraisal theory. We then define motivated reasoning and explain the mechanisms whereby it operates. Next, we link having hope with motivated reasoning, analyzing how the consumption of hope (as a marketable entity) is tightly coupled with cognitive biases. Here, we pay special attention to both adaptive and maladaptive consumer consequences of hope-motivated reasoning. Finally, we suggest directions for further study of this phenomenon.

An appraisal theory perspective on hope

According to appraisal theory, emotions are caused by appraisals or perceptions of a given situation (Ellsworth and Smith 1988; Frijda et al. 1989; Oatley and Johnson-Laird 1987; Roseman 1991). Appraisal theorists have identified a number of dimensions that individuals use to assess their environment, among them assessments of goal congruency, agency, certainty, normative/moral compatibility, and importance (Johnson and Stewart 2004; Roseman 1991).

In the appraisal theory framework, and as elaborated below, hope is defined as a positive emotion evoked in response to a goal-congruent outcome appraised as possible (MacInnis and de Mello 2005). As an emotion evoked in response to an appraisal, hope is characterized as a "high-road emotion," that is, one evoked in response to higher-order cognitions or appraisals (Shiv et al., this volume).

Positive valence. A number of researchers have hypothesized or confirmed empirically that hope is a positive emotion (e.g., Shaver et al. 1987). Hope is a pleasurable state that helps those in distress cope with fear and anxiety over an uncertain future (Lazarus 1999a). Myers (2000) links hope to happiness, and Belk (1996) has aptly described it as a state of exciting, yet illusory, anticipatory desire that has the power to sustain and nourish us.

Goal-congruence. Research on human goals is predicated on a basic assumption: individuals have goals, or desired outcomes that they aspire to achieve, and they strive
toward these ends until the experienced current state satisfactorily approximates the desired state (Gollwitzer and Moskowitz 1996). Hope is felt in response to outcomes appraised as favorable or goal-congruent (Lazarus 1991; Roseman 1991). Goal-congruence reflects the extent to which the environment is appraised as consistent with one's goals. In a benign environment, "goal-congruent" means that one makes an appraisal that a good, favorable, desired, or positive outcome (e.g., having a trim physique) could occur. In an aversive or threatening environment, "goal-congruent" means that a negative outcome could be avoided or solved (e.g., slow down aging). Hope thus applies equally to consumers with a promotion or a prevention focus (Pham and Higgins, this volume). In the case of a promotion focus, hope means that a good outcome can be realized, whereas in the case of a prevention focus, hope implies that a bad outcome that can be avoided.

Importantly, while hope relates to goals, it complements this literature in three ways: (1) it focuses on the outcomes presumed to result from goal achievement; (2) it adds an affective element to the study of goals by focusing on an emotion that arises from goal formulation and pursuit (Bagozzi et al. 2000); and (3) it indicates that consumers sometimes have a goal of having hope, as possession of this emotion is pleasurable and congruent with higher-order goals of seeking positive reinforcement.

- **Possibility.** A critical factor for the elicitation of hope is that goal attainment is appraised as possible. This last factor pertains to the *certainty* dimension of appraisal theory. As a future-oriented emotion, hope refers to states that have not yet been attained and as such, are uncertain. However, it is necessary that along the uncertainty continuum (i.e., from certain to occur to certain not to occur) the outcome is deemed possible (Lazarus 1991; Roseman 1991). Indeed, the possibility factor is a characteristic that differentiates hope from mere desire. As Lazarus (1999a: 653) writes, "Although desire is an essential feature, hope is much more than desire," because hope also requires "the possibility of an uncertain outcome." Averill et al. (1990) found that the most common factor initiating hope was changes in perceptions of possibility, such as an increase in the probability of a previously unlikely event. When the attainment of a desired end-state is appraised as impossible (e.g., "I cannot get rid of my wrinkles"), the resulting emotions are linked to frustration, anger, disappointment, or despair (e.g., Higgins 1987). Indeed, hopelessness or despair is experienced when a desired goal is seen as impossible, inducing a state of depression (Seligman 1975).

**The three facets of hope**

While appraisal theorists seem to agree that hope is an emotion evoked in response to an outcome appraised as goal-congruent and possible, definitions of hope in the psychology literature suggest at least three facets of hope, all of which incorporate appraisal dimensions of goal congruency and possibility. They are: (1) to hope; (2) to be hopeful; and (3) to have hope. While similar in the core appraisal dimensions, they differ in emphasis. Importantly, these three facets of hope correspond with and help clarify definitional inconsistencies in hope as defined by a
Consumer hope: A positively valenced emotion evoked when a goal-congruent outcome is appraised as possible.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 3.1** The three facets of consumer hope.

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**To Hope**

Definition: A positive emotion that varies as a function of the degree of yearning for a possible, goal-congruent, future outcome.

- Pieper (1994): an emotion that occurs when one is expecting good signaling all that one longs for.
- Rycroft (1979): a feeling or emotion about it that includes two features: we desire something we do not have; and we desire something we believe we could or may gain.

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**To Have Hope**

Definition: A positive emotion that arises when a goal-congruent future outcome is judged to be possible.

- Gelwick (1979): a belief that what is desirable and good is also possible.
- Haase et al. (1992): an energized mental state involving feelings of uneasiness or uncertainty and characterized by a cognitive, action-oriented expectation that a positive future goal or outcome is possible.

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**To Be Hopeful**

Definition: A positive emotion that rises as a function of expectations regarding the likelihood of a possible future goal-congruent outcome.

- Stollard (1969): a necessary condition for action to achieve a goal that is a function of the perceived probability of attaining the goal and the perceived importance of the goal.

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Figure 3.2 Definitions for the three facets of consumer hope.

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A variety of researchers in psychology, medicine, and other disciplines. Figure 3.1 indicates various ways in which the "hope" construct has been defined. As shown, various definitions correspond with each of the three facets. Figure 3.1 depicts the relationship between the three facets of hope.

To have hope is to enjoy a positive feeling that a goal-congruent outcome is
possible. The feeling of hope derives, then, from the consumer’s assessment of goal possibility. This implies that such an affective state is acquirable, and may thus be a goal in itself, as discussed in the next section. As an emotion evoked in response to an appraisal, hope is characterized as a “high-road emotion”, that is, one evoked in response to higher-order cognitions or appraisals (Shiv et al., this volume). One either has hope or does not have hope; and the hope one has can be false or true. One has hope when one does not assess a goal-congruent outcome as impossible, but rather sees potential for its possibility.

Consider the consumer who wants to lose weight in the next few months, and suppose this consumer needs to assess this goal-congruent outcome (i.e., losing weight) as possible. One way to facilitate such positive assessment is to afford oneself of means to goal attainment, such as products that present themselves as goal-enablers – in the present example, an herbal supplement that boosts metabolism, for instance. When this consumer purchases such a product, the benefit he is acquiring is not only the potential effects of the supplement on his body weight, but also the feeling of hope that his goal is possible. As illustrated in this example, the focus we place on having hope is particularly relevant to this book since (a) consumers have hope that products and services will yield outcomes that are consistent (or congruent) with their goals, and (b) the pleasurable experience of having hope may itself be a goal.

To hope is to yearn for a goal-congruent outcome regarded as possible. Notice that the appraisal of possibility distinguishes to hope from simply to yearn – in fact, the latter is independent from possibility assessments, while for the former the notion of possibility is critical. This facet of hope incorporates the appraisal dimension of yearning or importance, and suggests not a binary state, but rather a continuous emotion that varies as a function of the extent to which the outcome is yearned (i.e., desired, important, entails deficiency in the self). While two individuals may both have hope for losing weight, the two may differ in the extent to which they hope to lose weight, with one consumer yearning more for this outcome than another. One might say that the degree of hope relates to the goal-congruency dimension, as the individual appraises not the existence of a possible goal-congruent outcome, but rather how much yearning is associated with the goal-congruent outcome (i.e., how goal-congruent is it; see Figure 3.2).

To be hopeful is to assign an expectation level or perceived likelihood to the possibility of a goal-congruent outcome. To be hopeful is not synonymous with to have expectations; while the former is outcome-dependent, the latter is independent of the goal-congruence of the outcome (for example, one can expect a downturn in the economy, but one certainly is not hopeful that it will occur). This facet of hope operates on the uncertainty dimension of appraisal theory, with degrees of hopefulness varying as a function of the perceived likelihood of the goal-congruent outcome. Two consumers could have hope for surviving cancer, and both could hope (yearn) for this outcome, however one may be more hopeful about overcoming the disease, assigning a relatively high likelihood to this outcome, while another sees the probability of this outcome as low. Though they may “hold out hope” that the disease will be overcome, they do not expect that it will. Being hopeful is related to
the concept of optimism; however, optimism (when conceptualized as a state versus a trait variable) is a belief that incorporates the confidence assigned to the expectation level.

**Having hope as a goal**

Having hope has been seen, both by laypeople and scholars, as driver or means to goal achievement; for example, Stotland (1969) observed that hope is linked to goal-setting and pursuit. We should not overlook, however, the role of having hope as a goal in itself. As a pleasurable, uplifting emotion, having hope is a state we strive to attain. The quest for having hope, and the desire to sustain it, are powerful drivers of behavior. In light of Shiv et al.’s discussion (this volume) of the neurological effects of emotions, it is interesting that having hope has been associated with the release of neurotransmitters (endorphins and enkephalins) in the brain that are involved in the reduction of pain (Groopman 2004). As such, there may be a very primitive and biological basis for why individuals may put “having hope” as a goal in and of itself.

It is easy to understand why consumers would set “having hope” as a goal. As a positive emotion, hope uplifts and energizes. The evocation of hope engenders positive feelings that can induce a positive mood (Ellsworth and Smith 1988). The induction of a positive mood through hope relates to the concepts of mood repair and maintenance described in the mood literature (e.g., Isen 1987, 2001). The mood-enhancing qualities of having hope pertain both to consumers who focus on the achievement of positive outcomes, but also to those who focus on the avoidance of negative ones.¹

**The marketplace as a source of hope**

If we are to have or possess hope, there must be some source from which the possession of hope is derived. One such source is the marketplace. Indeed, the marketplace affords consumers a myriad of ways to buy and have hope, which illustrates how hope is one of the powerful drivers inside consumption. In other words – and borrowing from Charles Revson’s famous quote – factories make products, which in the stores are sold as hope. The consumption of hope from the marketplace is relevant to goals in multiple life domains and is derived from the availability of products and services that are viewed as making it possible for these goal-congruent outcomes to be realized.

Consumers assess the possibility of attaining their goals by evaluating the affordances available to them in themselves and their surrounding environment. Products are means that provide such affordances. Thus, by acquiring a hair-loss remedy that promises to stop hair loss, the consumer is buying a justification for his/her assessment of goal possibility, and in turn acquiring hope. If the product is effective at delivering the promised benefit, the consumer will have achieved two goals: the short-term goal of having hope, and the long-term goal of having a full head of hair.
Interestingly, the consumption of hope may outweigh a product’s or service’s ability to deliver on these hopes. From “ab machines” to fitness waters with negligible traces of vitamins and antioxidants, to magnetic bracelets that cure arthritis and “get rich overnight” pyramid schemes, the marketplace is rife with products and services that the dispassionate consumer would term, at best, as of dubious effectiveness. Nevertheless, many of these products enjoy a strong – and growing – share of consumer spending; to wit, the “alternative medicine” industry has been estimated at $18 billion a year. The individuals spending these billions are neither ignorant nor uneducated: to the contrary, most are affluent and knowledgeable (Francese 2003). The acts of buying such products becomes less puzzling when we realize that consumers are not buying weight loss or improved health, but rather hope for achieving such outcomes.

Notice that when we consider the intermediate goal of “having hope” as an end in itself, the actual efficacy of the product becomes secondary. This simple implication helps explain many instances of consumer choice in which the consumer may seem to behave in unjustified or sub-optimal ways, as in the examples above. While the outside observer may be puzzled by a consumer who purchases a very unorthodox lotion to eliminate wrinkles, and may be tempted to tout such consumer as “irrational” or “uneducated,” things take on a different perspective when we include “hope as a goal” in the equation; now, this consumer’s behavior might be termed completely rational, as her actions map perfectly into her goal of having hope.

We propose below that while hope can be had through consumption of goods and services offered in the marketplace, the acquisition and sustenance of hope is linked to a series of biased cognitive processes known as motivated reasoning. We explore these issues below and use Figure 3.3 as our guide.

**Motivated reasoning as a means to having hope**

Motivated reasoning is defined as a tendency to think about and evaluate information in a way that supports a particular directional conclusion (Kunda 1990). Motivated reasoning can be contrasted with “objective reasoning,” as when consumers process information so as to arrive at an accurate conclusion (truth). Such reasoning is evidenced in situations when consumers deeply process arguments so as to assess their true merits, as would be the case with the Elaboration Likelihood Model’s (ELM) “central route processing” (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). While both motivated and objective reasoning involve “motivation” and hence entail considerable processing of a message, the former involves a motivation to arrive at a desired conclusion while the latter involves a motivation to arrive at an accurate conclusion (see Kruglanski et al. 1993 for a detailed distinction between accuracy motivations and motivations for a specific closure).
What affects motivated reasoning?

Extant research shows that several factors stimulate the propensity for motivated reasoning. One such factor is exposure to information that challenges a prior attitude or preference toward a position or an object, such as a product or brand (e.g., Lord et al. 1979; Russo et al. 1998; Meloy 2000). For example, Jain and Maheswaran (2000) found that when consumers were confronted with a message that either supported or did not support their perceptions of a previously
preferred brand, they processed preference-inconsistent information more critically than they did preference-consistent information.

A second factor is the receipt of information that counters a desired self-concept. For example, Alloy et al. (1997) found that individuals were more likely to pay attention to and process positive self-relevant information and less likely to pay attention to and process less favorable information about themselves.

We argue here that a third factor affecting biased processing is hope. Sustaining hope sometimes may be possible only when consumers engage in motivated reasoning, as the directional nature of this type of biased cognitive processing may be necessary for continued assessments of the possibility of the goal-congruent outcome. Because the elicitation of hope is a function of goal-possibility assessments, we suggest that having hope that a goal-congruent outcome is possible affects the nature of judgment and decision-making via motivated reasoning. Motivated reasoning, we argue, is not only a response to having hope; it allows the individual to have and sustain hope, and thus fulfill a meta-goal of feeling good.³

The potential impact of having hope on motivated reasoning is supported by past writings describing the seductive power of hope in judgment processes. Averill et al. (1990) identified eight categories that reflect the ways in which people think about and experience hope. Of the eight, one stands out as irrefutably negative: hope is deception. In the same vein, Belk (1996) links hope with the “suspension of cynicism and disbelief.” These observations fit squarely within our conceptualization of hope framed in appraisal theories of emotion: Since having hope is contingent on appraisals of the possibility of a goal-congruent outcome, consumers should be motivated to hold onto the idea that this outcome is possible, rather than giving in to the assessment that the outcome is impossible or that the possible outcome may be goal-incongruent. While the latter appraisal would result in emotions like hopelessness and despair, the former appraisal results in having hope. Accordingly, consumers should be motivated to process information in a selective way so as to reach this conclusion.

**Hope-driven motivated reasoning**

Motivated reasoning is revealed by a set of biases and illusions that pertain to (a) the manner in which we process data from the external world and (b) the types of thoughts and images that occur in our internal world (see Figure 3.3). We argue below that having hope evokes motivated reasoning, which in turn allows individuals to sustain hope. Figure 3.3 incorporates the twin ideas about having hope: (a) consumers have hope to achieve a goal-congruent outcome, and (b) sustaining hope is itself a goal as the feeling associated with hope is pleasurable and positive.

**Biased processing of data**

We propose that hope induces motivated reasoning of information encountered in the external world and that the impact of hope on motivated reasoning is
revealed by a number of potential biases. We begin a brief review of some of these biases analyzing how perceptual defense may play a role in the pursuit of hope.

Perceptual defense (see Figure 3.3) is a bias in which the valence of available information affects the likelihood that such information is encoded and the speed with which it is processed. Research has shown that conscious recognition thresholds are higher for “taboo” concepts, negative emotional stimuli, etc., than for positive or neutral stimuli (Trope et al. 1997: 109). When consumers hope that arthritis can be relieved with magnetic therapy, they likely encode information supporting the effectiveness of a magnetic bracelet more readily and ignore or block information that suggests its ineffectiveness.

Two other biases are the confirmation and disconfirmation bias. Research reviewed by Johnson and Sherman (1990), Kunda (1990) and others indicates that individuals tend to focus on instances that confirm a favored hypothesis, labeled a confirmation bias. Sanbonmatsu et al. (1998) have extensively reviewed these types of biases that fall under the umbrella of “selective hypothesis testing.” Individuals who have hope have a “favored hypothesis” — that is, that a goal-related product is effective, and thus the goal-congruent outcome is possible. In contrast, individuals tend to ignore or counterargue information that runs contrary to the conclusion they would like to reach: a bias called the disconfirmation bias. Having hope that cellulite can be eliminated should also affect the likelihood of a disconfirmation bias since evidence that a given product is not an effective treatment for this condition runs contrary to the conclusion consumers wish to reach, and would elicit emotions like disappointment and frustration as opposed to hope.

The confirmation and disconfirmation biases also suggest an interaction between having hope and the congruity of information on the nature of cognitive elaboration. If confronted with information that supports the possibility of the goal-congruent outcome, consumers may likely elaborate on this information and generate support arguments that confirm it. In contrast, information that runs counter to a favored conclusion (e.g., outcome is not possible or is goal-incongruent) is more likely to be scrutinized and counterargued. Thus, a consumer who has hope that he can become more productive by redesigning his office with feng-shui principles will more likely counterargue information showing that this technique is ineffective, arguing that feng-shui detractors lack an understanding of this philosophy.

In addition to its effects on attentional focus and the generation of support and counterarguments, having hope may also affect what information is treated as evidence and how strongly the evidence is regarded. W yer and Frey (1983) found that subjects who received “failure” feedback in an intelligence test were more likely to judge such tests as less valid than those who had received “success” feedback. It makes sense to anticipate that consumers who wish to sustain hope for the possibility of a goal-congruent outcome may have more lenient acceptance criteria for information that supports its possibility and more rigorous acceptance criteria for information that points to its impossibility.

Rejecting a favored hypothesis means missing an opportunity to reach a goal-congruent outcome. For example, for a consumer who has hope about the
possibility of quitting smoking, rejecting the hypothesis that “individuals who use product A are more likely to quit smoking than those who don’t” implies facing the fact that the goal of quitting might be too difficult to achieve. Having hope may also cause consumers to evaluate product-favorable claims as stronger than consumers who do not have hope for a given outcome. In the same vein, information that runs counter to the possibility of a goal-congruent outcome may be judged as weak. Consistent with this hypothesis, Edwards and Smith (1996) found that when individuals were confronted with information that went against a favored conclusion, they tended to judge it as weaker than information compatible with a favored conclusion (18). For example, compared to consumers for whom weight loss is not goal-relevant, those who have hope that weight loss is possible may be more likely to discount an exposé of a diet system they are using, judging the presented information as weak. Those who have hope may, for example, argue that the research described in the exposé was conducted by a private party, and not by a well-respected body such as the American Medical Association.

Having hope may also interact with the valence of information to affect the length of information search (see Figure 3.3). Edwards and Smith (1996) argue that people should terminate search earlier (i.e., be content with fewer pieces of information) when the information supports a desired conclusion (e.g., when it suggests that a goal-congruent outcome is possible) than when it does not. When information supports the notion that the goal-congruent outcome can be achieved, individuals should be less motivated to search further as additional search runs the risk of identifying information that does not support it. In contrast, when information does not support the occurrence of the goal-congruent outcome or supports the occurrence of a goal-incongruent outcome, individuals might search longer, probably due to their motivated “skepticism” of goal-incongruent information, or perhaps to find information that will support it.

Finally, past research has found that consumers may sub-type information that does not support a desired conclusion, treating it as an unusual or exceptional case, or creating ad hoc hypotheses that explain it away. For example, research by Kunda and Oleson (1995) in social groups and stereotyping showed that subjects tended to use irrelevant information or neutral attributes to sub-type stereotype-disconfirming exemplars, and thus “protect” their stereotype. It appears, then, that individuals want to hold on to their beliefs, but feel they need a reason or justification to do so – however irrelevant it may be. We surmise that hope should also lead to subtyping of information that does not support the possibility of the goal-congruent outcome.

**Biased thoughts and images about the future**

Having hope for a goal-congruent outcome can also bias internally generated thoughts and images of possible uncertain futures (see Figure 3.3). Considerable research supports the notion that the content of future-oriented thoughts and images is biased in favor of outcomes that are positive, such as those that are goal-congruent. Fiske and Taylor (1991: 215) indicate that “over a wide variety of
tasks, subjects' predictions of what will occur in the future correspond closely to what they would like to see happen or what is socially desirable, rather than what is objectively likely. This tendency to regard one's future as positive has been labeled an optimistic bias. A number of studies have shown that when thinking about the future individuals estimate the likelihood that they will experience a wide variety of pleasant (goal-congruent) events more so than will their peers. We have a tendency to believe, for example, that we are much more likely than our peers to get a good first job, get a good salary, or have a gifted child (Weinstein 1980). Conversely, when asked about the chances of experiencing a wide variety of negative (goal-incongruent) events including getting a disease (Menon et al. 2002), being victim of a crime (Perloff and Fetzer 1986), or being depressed (Kuiper et al. 1983) most people believe that they are less likely than their peers to experience such outcomes. Since hope involves a positive goal-congruent outcome, it is likely that the pursuit of having hope induces biases in the direction of positive versus negative states. Thus, use of the optimistic bias should allow consumers to sustain hope.

Hope may not only bias the content of future-oriented thoughts, but also the perceived likelihood that the possible goal-congruent outcome will actually occur. Thus, it can alter assessments of possibility into one of likelihood or probability, inducing the state of being hopeful. Research has found that imagining positive futures enhances the perceived likelihood that these experiences will actually occur. Markus and Nurius (1986) found that when asked about what the future holds, four times more positive than negative outcomes were anticipated by subjects. Matlin and Stang (1978) review evidence suggesting that people judge pleasant events (such as those we have hope for) as more likely than unpleasant ones even when the actual probabilities of the events are the same. Combined, the above research suggests that the goal congruency and possibility components of hope stimulate thoughts about a positive (goal congruent) future and the expectations of its likelihood. Such an expectation should lead to having and sustaining hope.

One potential reason why we may be biased in our expectations of goal-congruent outcomes is a processing bias involved in mental simulation referred to as focalism (Wilson et al. 2000). Focalism is a tendency to focus future-oriented thoughts and images too much on a specific outcome and not enough on other possible outcomes that might occur. The assessment of possibility of a future outcome is thus constrained to the occurrence of the focal (goal-congruent) outcome and not others. Because consumers want to have and sustain hope that a goal-congruent outcome is possible, they will likely focus internal thoughts and images on scenarios and arguments that affirm the outcome’s possibility (i.e., this product will work), not those that suggest its impossibility or the possibility of a goal-incongruent outcome (i.e., this product may fail or it may have side effects). One important implication of these biases is that the pursuit of hope may lead consumers to risky behaviors, as we will discuss later.
Having hope and the goal enactment process

Because hope is a goal-related emotion, the analysis of its dynamics must follow that of goal pursuit, particularly as it pertains to the appraisal of goal relevance and possibility. The assessment of goal possibility takes place at several stages along the goal pursuit process (see Figure 3.3). The cognitive processes involved in constructing and modifying goals are referred to as goal determination (Huffman et al. 2000). Goals that are of high personal relevance and are rooted in higher-order needs and motives usually require that consumers engage in processes of goal determination that involve several goal levels in a means-end chain type of progression. For example, a consumer who desires to be admired by his peers may wish to become more physically attractive. In order to attain this intermediate goal, he may set a goal to lose weight, which could be achieved by exercising more, which in turn could be done if he had more energy and stamina. This process that links goals from higher levels (e.g., life themes and values) to lower levels (e.g., current concerns, benefits sought, and consumption intentions) is referred to as incorporation (see Huffman et al. 2000, for a discussion).

During this process, the consumer must assess the possibility of each sub-goal along the chain, starting with the lower, most immediate sub-goal. In the example above, the consumer may need to determine whether there is a means (e.g., a product) that will provide him with the added energy and stamina that he needs in order to exercise more, which will lead to weight loss, to improved physical appearance, and finally to the admiration of his peers. After the initial overall evaluation of goal attainment, two basic anticipated emotional outcomes are possible: if attainment is seen as possible, our consumer will have hope; if not, he will experience anxiety and despair. Moreover, once evoked, having hope may affect the nature of information-processing across multiple stages of the goal-enactment process described by Bagozzi and Dholakhia (1999) as shown in Figure 3.3 and described below.

Having hope at the goal formation, intention, and choice stages

Bagozzi (1992) argues that the decision of which goals to pursue is a function of (among other things) the perceived likelihood that the pursuit of the goal will result in achievement. The biases reviewed above suggest that having hope can affect expectations or perceptions of outcome likelihood and hence impact consumer decision-making. Having hope, for example, may induce elaboration that suggests to consumers that the goal-congruent outcome is not only possible, but likely for them. The research on focalism and the optimistic bias mentioned earlier indicate that consumers are likely to imagine that things for which they have hope are more likely to happen to them than they are to happen to other people. The confirmation bias suggests that hope may make one susceptible, among other things, to the use of incomplete and unrepresentative data in forming expectations. For example, a consumer who has hope that there is a cure
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for cancer may be convinced that cancer eradication can be achieved through positive imagery because he has read about someone “who whipped the Big C after practicing mental imagery” (Gilovich 1991: 29). Hence, the biases just reviewed would lead us to expect that hope plays a key role in the formation of intentions as it increases consumers’ perceptions that the goal-congruent outcome will occur. At this stage, consumers develop attitudes and beliefs congruent with their state of “having hope.” For example, consumers may have hope that products can be found in the marketplace that will slow down or eliminate their signs of aging. The action tendencies generated from having hope carry the consumer to the next step in the goal pursuit process.

**Having hope at the action-planning and initiation stages**

At the action-planning stage, consumers derive a plan regarding how goals can be achieved and which behaviors should be initiated to foster goal achievement (Bagozzi and Dholakia 1999). Having hope for the achievement of the goal-congruent outcome may encourage motivated reasoning processes that suggest that actions designed to initiate the outcome are indeed likely to culminate in its occurrence. Thus, while elderly consumers who do not have hope (i.e., are hopeless) will most likely give up and resign themselves to the idea that “reversing aging” is not possible, and thus not invest any effort in searching for products related to this goal, those who have hope will likely start searching for products that are advertised as means to “looking and staying younger.”

**Having hope at the product evaluation stage**

Because having hope fosters motivated reasoning, it will likely stimulate a number of biases and illusions when consumers initially evaluate products during their search for goal-related goods and services in the marketplace. Biased hypothesis testing and perceptual defense stimulated by hope may lead consumers to overlook disconfirming evidence and instead search for more elusive corroborating evidence that suggests that a product can indeed facilitate the outcome for which the consumer has hope. The confirmation bias may lead consumers to interpret ambiguous or irrelevant information stated in marketing communications as supportive of the product’s quality. Having hope for the possibility of a goal-congruent outcome may lead consumers to adopt less rigorous acceptance criteria and stronger rejection criteria in evaluating evidence favoring a product’s ability to achieve a goal-congruent outcome, making consumers more vulnerable to waffle words, incomplete comparisons, pragmatic implications, implied superiority, and puffery in advertising. By virtue of this optimism bias, consumers who have hope that a given outcome is possible may be more likely to count themselves outside the group of people for whom some products (e.g., drugs, beauty aids, and weight loss supplements) have side effects.
Having hope at the goal achievement stage

Finally, having hope may affect motivated reasoning in judgments of goal achievement. Particularly in cases where consumers do not have (or are not aware of) alternative means (i.e., products) for goal achievement, it becomes critical for them to perceive that goal achievement has occurred, or that progress towards it has been made. In other words, if the product in question is one of a very scarce list of alternatives to goal attainment, its effectiveness becomes critical, since failure entails the assessment that goal achievement may not be possible, thus terminating hope. This means that consumers have a motivation to believe that the product has indeed helped them to get closer to their goals, particularly when there are not many other products on the market that they could use if this one failed. By virtue of the confirmation bias, consumers may interpret as “supportive of product effectiveness” data gathered about the product post-consumption that they would normally catalog as unsupportive. Based on biased self-testing, consumers who have hope about a goal-congruent outcome may interpret ambiguous product experiences as evidence for its success. The confirmation and disconfirmation biases may cause consumers to selectively focus on information and other consumers that suggest that the product is good and to ignore information or consumer feedback that runs counter to it, as suggested by cognitive dissonance theory. Consumers may also use weaker acceptance criteria to judge product satisfaction. Even though product performance may be ambiguous or even slightly negative, consumers may preserve the initial affect attached toward the product. This is particularly likely to occur with credence products for which an objective measure of performance may not be available. For example, consumers cannot readily determine whether the antioxidants present in the supplements they are taking are actually slowing down the aging process, or whether a certain technique has “harmonized their metabolism.” Past research supports the notion that motivated reasoning can impact evaluations of outcome performance. This phenomenon has been labeled the “illusion of success” (Taylor et al. 2000).

Clearly, a rational consumer would not continue purchasing a product that has proved to be ineffective. At some point, even the motivation to have and sustain hope must yield to objective reality. What we are arguing, however, is that giving up hope is an emotionally costly choice. When hope does not depend on just one product (i.e., when there are many alternative means to goal attainment), the “hope cost” of rejecting a product as ineffective is minimal, since the consumer can immediately try an alternative, and continue sustaining hope. On the other hand, when alternatives have become too scarce, consumers are likely to be more willing to give the “failing” product the benefit of the doubt and try it again, with the hope that this time it will yield the desired results.
The role of “perception of objectivity” in motivated reasoning

Though our arguments thus far suggest that consumers engage in motivated reasoning to imply that the goal-congruent outcome is possible, one might ask, why must a consumer engage in such an effortful cognitive process? Why not just believe that the goal is attainable? We believe the answer is twofold. First, we must understand the difference between faith and hope: while the former is a belief that is unquestioned and need not be founded in reason (e.g., religious faith), hope does have cognitive roots and demands a reason to believe that the future desired outcome may be possible. Second, individuals wish to perceive themselves as rational and objective. Indeed, Asch (1952) proposed that we tend to believe that we are “bias-free” – a basic principle of human experience that he labeled “naive realism.” Consumers who want to have hope must, then, find reasons to justify their entitlement to enjoying this cognitively laden emotion, and at the same time maintain their self-perception of being rational and objective. Thus, another important factor involved in motivated reasoning is the individual’s need to not violate this self-perception, and to cater to the cognitive demands of hope.

Individuals have indeed been shown to exhibit a tendency that has been labeled the illusion of objectivity by Trope et al. (1997). The need for justifications (however irrelevant or neutral they may be) to form or retain an attitude has been shown in social psychology, and in the work by Kunda and Oleson (1995) cited earlier. Previous research in consumer behavior has shown that consumers do use irrelevant information in product choice decisions (e.g., Brown and Carpenter 2000). If the illusion of objectivity is a natural concomitant of motivated reasoning, and if the pursuit of hope induces motivated reasoning, consumers who have hope about a possible goal-congruent outcome might show evidence of trying to maintain this illusion. We have seen instances of this type of phenomenon in the discussion of motivated reasoning mechanisms in the previous section. The selective gathering of product information and the assessment of this information in terms of strength and diagnosticity are in fact efforts to imbue the processing effects of having hope with an aura of reason. Consider a consumer who has hope about the efficacy of a magnetic bracelet to relieve her arthritis: this consumer may treat information in an ad that describes the bracelet as “featuring magnetized copper and zinc spheres” as relevant to the product’s effectiveness claims, regardless of the factual relevance of such attributes.

Consumer consequences of having hope

We will see that acquiring the hope that goals can be achieved through the marketplace is associated with both positive and negative outcomes; among the former are coping and goal achievement, while the latter include inaccurate assessments of risk and self-deception.

It has been proposed that emotions serve functional purposes (Izard and Ackerman 2000; Lazarus 1991). An evolutionary-psychological view of emotions
presents affective reactions as functionally specialized for solving different adaptive problems, as if they triggered micro-programs (i.e., fight, flight, seek, avoid, etc.) that engage individuals in actions conducive to safeguarding their best interests. It has been observed, however, that the action tendencies triggered by emotions may have conflicting and maladaptive consequences (Cosmides and Tooby 2000). Having and sustaining hope can, too, have both adaptive and maladaptive possible consequences as described below.

Adaptive consequences

Coping and well-being

Considerable research shows that when individuals are faced with aversive outcomes (e.g., cancer), having hope acts as a coping mechanism, raising moods and protecting individuals from feelings of despair (Affleck et al. 2001; Lazarus 1999a). Having hope is often linked with coping and positive adaptation (Lazarus 1991; 1999b) perhaps because when situations appear bleak, all people have to hold onto are hopes that the goal-congruent outcome will occur. As Averill et al. (1990) note, hope is said to be the best medicine. It “nourishes, guides, uplifts, and supports a person in times of difficulty” (100). Perhaps the fact that “hope springs eternal” arises from its use as a coping mechanism to help survival in the bleakest of times.

Having hope has been shown to have positive psychological benefits in coping with medical illnesses, such as viewing aversive situations as having a silver lining and protecting individuals from negative moods. It has also been linked with coping with aversive physical conditions. Individuals who have hope for overcoming illness show greater pain endurance, more proactive and more positive self-care practices, delayed illness timing, and afflictions that are less severe of shorter duration (see Taylor et al. 2000, for reviews).

Having hope may motivate and sustain consumers in other difficult consumption contexts where coping resources are needed. Such consumer contexts would include loss of valued possessions through divorce, natural disasters, and institutionalization. Given its effects on coping, having hope and its effects on motivated reasoning may also positively influence consumer well-being.

Goal achievement

Having hope may also be adaptive because it affects goal achievement. The positive outlook inherent in hope can be easily associated with goal formation, intention, and action-planning. Indeed, feelings of hope are associated with action tendencies and drive toward goal pursuit (see Stotland 1969), to the extent that hope stimulates goal-setting, intention formation, and action-planning. Additionally, having hope should motivate action and control (i.e., commitment to the goal). Averill et al. (1990) suggest that having hope helps people remain loyal and committed to action even when logically they should, perhaps, be skeptical. Given
the impact of having hope on stages of the goal enactment process (see Figure 3.3), it is not surprising that having hope is linked with actual goal achievement (Snyder et al. 1997).

**Maladaptive consequences**

**Consumer risk**

Having hope and its effects on motivated reasoning may also lead individuals to engage in risky consumption practices. In their eagerness to sustain hope, consumers may overlook or ignore the dangers involved in certain treatments or over-the-counter drugs (e.g., ephedra, St. John’s wort). In the pursuit of goal-congruent outcomes, particularly as they vie to attain an ideal state, consumers may be led by an approach motive (Higgins 1998). Research has shown that this motive is accompanied by a promotion focus, which in terms of product information search and evaluation processes leads consumers to focus on the benefits rather than on the costs of such products (see Kardes and Cronley 2000, for a detailed discussion). The role of the pursuit of hope on consumer behavior complements the predictions of regulatory focus theory for promotion focus (Higgins 2002). We posit, however, that when consumption goals are framed in terms of having hope (i.e., acquiring this feeling as the result of consumption), cases normally seen as having an avoidance motivation (and a prevention focus) such as avoiding a disease, may actually elicit a promotion focus. For example, while the goal “avoiding arthritis” is clearly an avoidance goal, that of “having hope that arthritis will be avoided” is framed as an approach goal. Depending on the framing, thus, the consumer would be led by either a prevention or a promotion focus. This distinction has important implications that must be analyzed by future research.

A critical corollary of the above discussion is that it is not just that the pursuit of hope may raise the risk tolerance level for consumers (i.e., make them conscientiously more accepting of risk), but rather that it may prevent them from making an appropriate risk assessment on which to base their decisions. When this is the case, the consequences of pursuing hope through motivated reasoning are clearly maladaptive.

**Self-deception**

Snyder and Higgins (1988) coined the term “reality negotiation” to describe a process whereby individuals interpret outcomes in a self-serving manner in order to avoid revising their current beliefs in the face of challenging or discrepant information. It is thought to encompass “any strategy that serves to maintain positive beliefs about the self under conditions threatening to the self” (Eliott et al. 1991: 608), including the optimistic bias.

As part of reality negotiation, consumers may develop a false feeling of hope (i.e., having hope when they should not) about the possibility of a goal-congruent outcome (Snyder 1989). Polivy and Herman (2002: 678) studied false hopes in
individuals and observed that, despite continuing failure, people persist in their self-change attempts, convincing themselves that “with a few adjustments, success will be within their grasp,” in a cycle that is “liable to continue indefinitely.” These individuals may set unrealistic goals to become slimmer, quit smoking, or create an improved new self. The importance of consumers learning to distinguish between feasible and impossible goals becomes clear: overconfidence and false hopes may lead to maladaptive consumer behavior so as to result in failure, distress, and unhappiness.

Conclusion

This chapter has advanced a theoretical framework that describes the concept of having hope, and proposed that arousal of this positive emotional state encourages motivated reasoning so as to sustain hope. We posit that having hope is a powerful affective state that individuals strive to attain and nourish. In order to do so, they search for and purchase products that are seen as means to achieve the individual’s desired end-state. Throughout the process of goal pursuit – including product search, choice, and post-use evaluation – having hope is linked to motivated reasoning, and it informs consumers’ cognitive processes: In assessing whether the product in question indeed affords having hope about the achievement of the desired end-state, consumers engage in motivated reasoning, whereby their search and evaluation of product information is biased toward a favorable appraisal of the target product.

An in-depth exploration of hope-related biased information-processing is called for, in view of its potential wide-reaching effects on consumer well-being: effects that range from positive adaptive coping during times of adversity, to minor nuisances (disappointment, small sums of misspent money) from realized self-delusion, to tragic outcomes (improper medication, injury, and death) from failure to encode and process potentially negative outcomes. The next step, thus, entails the development of models that allow us to maximize the benefits, and minimize the downsides, of our perennial pursuit of hope.

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Notes

1 Importantly, while hope may evoke a positive mood the construct of hope is distinct from mood. First, the literature on mood links cognitive processes with more flexibility (e.g., consideration of alternatives), innovativeness/creativity, thoroughness (under certain circumstances, e.g., if the task is enjoyable), and efficiency (because of flexibility...
and innovativeness mentioned above). The effects of hope are narrower, and, as we suggest below, are guided by a motivation for specific closure (i.e., "this goal-congruent outcome is possible"). The motivation for specific closure explains the outcomes we discuss here much better than "positive mood" would. Moreover, a person who is pursuing hope (but hasn't yet achieved it) is not necessarily in a positive mood yet.

2 Although future research on this topic is warranted, we surmise that the three facets of hope in Figure 3.1 are all related to motivated reasoning, though in different ways. While having hope may stimulate motivated reasoning, the degree to which consumers engage in motivated reasoning may be a function of the degree to which they hope for that outcome (i.e., yearn for it; see MacInnis and de Mello 2005). Hopefulness may be an outcome of motivated reasoning induced by hope as motivated reasoning may not only keep hope alive but may also alter the perceived likelihood that the goal-congruent outcome will occur.

3 The term "desirable" means "goal-congruent", and should not be confused with the degree of desirability or the amount of yearning one has for the goal-congruent outcome

References


