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Help Seeking Consumers:

Conceptual Framework and Empirical Investigation

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**Help Seeking Consumers:
Conceptual Framework and Empirical Investigation**

by

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of the University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2017

Dedication

To my dearest Appa Kyuhyun, Umma Yuok, Unni Hyunok Kate, the Currie family, and the newest addition to the CurrieLee family, Aidan. Love y'all!

Acknowledgement

My dearest McCombs family - Thank you for seeing and believing in my potentials, raising me to become a well-rounded researcher, and teaching me what it means to have a career that exists to support and serve others. Raising up a doctoral student is really an immense mission. Spending 1/5 of my life at McCombs, countless life changes happened, all of which took me by surprise. Professors, staffs, and PhD students at McCombs were with me along every step of my journey, making it possible for me to stay on this path and take on new challenges.

Andy, thank you for showing me what it means to be a great advisor, mentor, and friend. Spending countless hours discussing ideas, results, and next steps every week during my time at McCombs, I always walked out of your office feeling encouraged and hopeful. I respect you for your unquenchable curiosity for research, enthusiasm for teaching, and love for your family. Susan, Julie, Raj, and David, your unceasing support, high standards, and genuine care got me through this program. You have opened up your lives to help me in academic realm and personal things, which really meant the world to me throughout this rigorous learning process. Vijay, Garrett, Raji, Leigh, Jade, Raghu, Jason, Ty, Adrian, Taylor, Frenkel, and Wayne, thank you for teaching me how to be resourceful for others. Josephine, Helen, and Susannah, thanks for making sure that I passed all the bars, stayed on track, and maintained positivity. We really have an amazing marketing group at McCombs, and I'm proud to call myself your student.

Lan, EJ, and Jacob, how lucky I am to have started this PhD program with you! Taking each step with you really made it possible for me to persist in finding and making

sense of the endless puzzle pieces. Sunaina, Jaeun, Joon, Szuchi, Niket, Sandeep, Saim, Joseph, and Leo, thanks for sharing your wisdom about life as a doctoral student and an assistant professor. Chandra, Nandini, Gunes, Xinying, Jerry, Jiyoung, Zhuping, Sandra, Sean, Mike, and Frank, I got through this while laughing, eating, and working with y'all!

My dearest Hill House and Northwest Fellowship family – Mary Jane and Greg, thank you for opening up your house for me and allowing me to stay rooted in Christ. My weekly dose of energy came from Tuesday prayers with Elizabeth, Nicole, Mollie, Ellyn, Laura, and Karina, Thursday Bible studies with UT graduate students, and so many friends I was blessed to meet through Hill House. Roger, Shirley, Karen, and Daniel, from sharing Sunday luncheon to living life under the same roof, you showed me what it means to build generations of family under God's love and faithfulness. Dayton, Kent, Glover, Pruski, Castiglioni, and the prayer room families, sharing life with you allowed me to live life as deeply loved and free person. My dearest teens, Trinity, Hannah, Abby, Nathan, Natalie, Olivia, and AWANA ladies and gents, thanks for sharing your vibrant energy with me. I am also grateful for my friends at Cru, Vox Veniae, Austin Stone, Evergreen, and Harvest. My homies, Jia, Erin, Rebecca, Yookyong, and Pamela, you really know the ins and outs of my daily grinds in the PhD program. Thanks for taking good care of me and praying for me.

Dad, Mom, and Kate – I am overwhelmingly grateful to be fully known and be fully loved by you. Thank you for being the greatest source of my energy and life. Appa, thank you for being my life-long mentor, teacher, protector, and guide. Your life as a scholar inspired me to walk this path, and I really like it. Thanks for always doing your

best to give me more than enough. You make me feel like a beloved little girl dancing on a giant solid rock in a safe, abundant forest. Thanks for being my rock. Umma, your unceasing support really got me through life. I feel alive when you make funny jokes to uplift my spirit, sing me lullaby at night, give me endless hugs and kisses, and enjoy life together like goofy kids. You always know how to make me smile. Thank you for your life-giving wisdom. I love being your baby! Unni, thanks for being my best friend from my day one on this planet. From our playtime under large umbrellas as kids, to our road trips around the world as grownups, my life is just full of fun with you. Thanks for having so much faith in me, showing me how to do my best in all I do, and taking me with you on manifold life adventures. My dearest family, your unconditional love makes it possible for me to live a life of adventure. I know you are with me wherever I am. I love you so much, and I love you more and more each day!

Dearest God, thank you for holding my hands and taking me to places you want to show me, to people you'd like me to meet. Thank you for the gift of life. How wide, long, high, and deep is the love of Christ! How blessed we are to know and abide in this love that surpasses knowledge.

Yep, love got me through PhD!

You all really are my inspiration.

Thank you for believing in me and sharing this life with me.

With much love and gratitude, Hyunjung Crystal Lee

**Help Seeking Consumers:
Conceptual Framework and Empirical Investigation**

by

Hyun Jung Lee, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

SUPERVISOR: Andrew D. Gershoff

The goal of this dissertation is to contribute to the field's understanding of the factors that influence when and how consumers are likely to seek and avoid seeking help. Essay 1 provides the conceptual framework covering important factors that influence consumers' motivation to solve a problem, the help-seeking process, and moderators of this process. Consumers often encounter a problem while striving to achieve a goal, and the problem-solving requires generation or consideration of potential means. These means may include strategies whereby consumers use their own effort and resources, but may also include soliciting effort and resources from others. The decision to ask for help involves costs and benefits related to personal and social domains. Importantly, such cost-benefit analysis can be moderated by factors related to perceptions of the social context, self, others, and the needed help (e.g. social norm, personal mastery goal, interpersonal judgment and fairness, and expedient need).

Essay 2 focuses on a specific context to explore how contextual cues in the help seeking environment influence perceptions of norms for help-seeking. I demonstrate that the decision to post a question on an online product forum can be influenced by the perceived social norm established by preexisting questions that peer consumers have posted on the forum (studies 1 and 2). Consumers are often concerned with others' perceptions when seeking help in public settings. To accurately identify the specific social judgment that hinders consumers' help-seeking decisions, I examine several factors that could mitigate consumers' reluctance: public self-assessment of one's own question (studies 3, 4, and 8), public acknowledgment of one's achievements in other domains (study 5), the communal norm of the forum (study 6), and the ability to reward the potential help-givers (study 7 and 8). This work has the potential to help marketers recognize and mitigate context-relevant social and emotional barriers to seeking help and facilitate consumer help-seeking decisions. With this knowledge, marketers may also enrich help-platforms in ways consumers will truly appreciate while also facilitating the development of consumers' lasting relationships with each other and with the firm.

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Essay I

An Integrative Framework for Consumer Help-Seeking Process

Consumer Help-Seeking Behavior: Definition and Scope

Help-seeking – the act of asking others for assistance, information, advice, resources, or support – is one of the ways through which consumers solve problems, achieve goals, and otherwise arrive at desired states (Hofmann, Lei, and Grant 2009; Lee 1997, 2002; Nadler, Ellis, and Bar 2003). For instance, consumers often seek help to solve problems related to their health, finances, or products. Consumers may need help finding the right doctors and understanding proper medical procedures for ongoing health symptoms (Friedman and Churchill 1987; Tengilimoglu, et al. 2015). They sometimes need support groups to deal with their dietary issues or individual therapy for substance addictions (Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010; Bien, Miller, and Boroughs 1993; Kahler et al. 2015; Brown et al. 2013). They may need help choosing a financial aid service or the stock investment portfolio that best suits their fiscal capabilities (Joo and Garble 2001; Usta and Haubl 2011). They sometimes need help when buying products, such as cars (Bell 1967; Kohler et al. 2011). Consumers may need help understanding product features with which they are not familiar or the necessary add-on services for an app that could enhance their lifestyle. They may also need help in learning new skills such as becoming literate, operating a new camera, performing home repairs, or troubleshooting computer malfunctions (Adkins and Ozanne 2005; Mick and Fournir 1998). At other times, they may need tangible resources that they do not have, such as food, clothing, or

lodging. While these deficits, problems, or needs vastly differ in terms of the type of help necessary, all of them can be partially or entirely solved with the time, effort, or resources of others (DePaulo, Nadler, and Fisher 1983).

Consumer help-seeking behavior can be understood through the lens of consumer motivation, goals, and potential means to achieve goals (Kopetz et al. 2012). Consumer goals represent desirable end states that are attainable through action (Kruglanski 1996; Kruglanski et al. 2002). When a consumer recognizes and desires to achieve a specific end state, help-seeking behavior can be one of the means through which he or she achieves that desired state. Here, “means” are any activities, events, or circumstances perceived as likely to contribute to progress on a goal (Markman, Brendl, and Kim 2007; Shah and Kruglansky 2003). Thus, help-seeking is a behavioral strategy – a goal-directed and intentional action – that may facilitate a consumer’s advancement toward a goal (Newman 1994; Nelson-Le Gall 1985; Oettingen et al. 2010).

Consumer behavior is essentially goal-oriented behavior (Baumgartner and Pieters 2008), and it is not uncommon for consumers to have goals that they perceive great difficulty in achieving or simply are not capable of achieving on their own (Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010). Thus, help seeking behavior may take many forms, from trivial (asking a stranger for directions to a museum in a foreign city) to life-changing (asking a physician to diagnose and treat an unexplained illness). Help-seeking can also happen through a number of different avenues, including an individual asking for help from a specific person, from a group of people, or from a business, agency, or organization (Katz 1981). It can occur in private, one to one, settings, or in public where requests for help

may be observed by others. It may involve professional relationships, where one must pay for the help, or personal relationships, where one may request that another gives time, effort, or resources without any payment at all. It may involve people who know one another and have an ongoing relationship, or it may involve strangers who are unlikely to ever interact again. In addition, help-seeking can occur through different channels – including through face-to-face interaction, and through less direct mediums such as through mail, telephone, or online communication.

Importance of Understanding Consumer Help-Seeking Behavior

While consumers regularly need assistance in achieving goals, the marketing literature that provides frameworks on when and how consumers seek help is fairly sparse. Instead, marketing literature has largely focused on examining factors that influence help-giving decisions. For example, research has investigated consumers' decisions to donate resources (Dickert, Sagara, and Slovic 2011; Strahilevitz and Myers 1998; Zhou et al. 2011), to post recommendations and reviews about products and businesses (Baker, Donthu, and Kumar 2016; Rosario et al. 2016; Packard and Wooten 2013; Zhao and Xie 2011), and to answer other consumers' questions about products (Mathwick, Wiertz, and de Ruyter 2007; Thompson, Kim, and Smith 2016). Exploring consumer helping from the perspective of the giver allows researchers to understand only one side of the equation. Helping relations is essentially an interpersonal phenomena between the helper and the receiver. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of helping relation require analysis of both the help-giver and the help-seeker's perspectives.

Help-seeking decisions are important for both consumers and marketers to understand. From the consumers' perspective, a better understanding of the help-seeking decision process may also better facilitate the problem recognition, whether help is actually needed, and where to look for available help. Moreover, it also allows consumers to devise strategies for seeking help while protecting other potentially conflicting needs, such as the need for autonomy and competence (DePaulo 1983). Help-seeking can also affect consumers' likelihood to achieve their goals, learn new skills, and benefit from feelings of learning and mastery (Boekaerts, Pintrich, and Zeidner 2000; Karabenick 1998; Schunk and Zimmerman 1998). Understanding factors that influence the help-seeking process may also allow consumers to be sensitive to the needs of other help-seeking consumers, which could assist in building beneficial and lasting relationships between consumers (Mathwick, Wiertz, and de Ruyter 2008; Thompson, Kim, and Smith 2016; Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009).

From the marketers' perspective, a comprehensive understanding of the help-seeking decision process may allow them to better develop ways to assist consumers in recognizing their problems and better able to find the assistance needed to find, choose, use, and benefit from products and services. Research has shown that consumers often have trouble using sophisticated products and this can lead to frustration and dissatisfaction (Folkes 1984; Mick and Fournier 1998). So better understanding the best times and methods for offering help may reduce this. Marketers may also be more aware of factors that may hinder consumers from seeking help so they can devise ways to maximize the opportunity to effectively assist consumers. When consumers seek and

receive help successfully, they are more likely to be satisfied with the product, have a positive attitude toward the brand, and feel grateful for the effort made by the company (Morales 2005; Palmatier et al. 2009). From there, they may be more likely to build a personal connection with the firm, increase brand loyalty, and spread positive word of mouth about the company (Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012; Park et al. 2010).

Yet, refraining from certain forms of help-seeking can also be beneficial for both consumers and firms. If consumers seek help without attempting to solve a problem on their own and completely rely on others for help, then they may be less satisfied with their own abilities, and may not learn as much about a product compared to when they put in effort to solve problems on their own. This may lead consumers to improperly utilize products and may have detrimental consequences for their safety in operating those products. From the perspective of the firm, having a lot of consumers who need help could overwhelm employees (Shugan 2005; Zeithaml, Rust, and Lemon 2001). In addition, help-giving can be costly for the firm, so marketers need to understand when and how consumers decide to ask for help in order to manage costs and direct consumers to seek help through alternative platforms (Wetzel, Hammerschmidt, and Zablah 2014). Some companies, like Apple Workshops, encourage consumer help-seeking behaviors by providing product training services for free or at a low cost. This allows the firm to not only educate the consumers about product versatility, but also introduce add-on services related to the product. Companies also use online product forums for consumers to answer each other's questions while company agents moderate the forum (e.g. forum.Lenovo.com).

Given the importance of help-seeking behaviors to consumers and marketers, it is important that marketing researchers build an understanding of the processes and factors that influence when and how consumers make decisions about whether to ask for assistance. By providing a framework regarding when and how help-seeking could be encouraged, marketers can make informed decisions about ways to provide effective avenues to help solve consumers' encountered problems and meet their needs.

Understanding the consumer help-seeking process also has important implications for theory in psychology. First, prior work suggests that even when the offered help may improve goal achievement, consumers on the receiving-end may respond with reluctance or refusal, or other negative outcomes. For example, help that is given without being requested may threaten the receiver's perceptions of their own abilities, efficacy, and esteem, which may lead individuals to feel burdened by the implications of receiving help (i.e. "I am too stupid to understand it on my own" or "I don't want to be a bother"; Fisher 1983). These negative effects may also occur when the help provider, or other observers, negatively judge the help seeker, or are perceived as forming negative judgments. When individuals perceive such judgment from others, they may also come to judge the help provider negatively (Algoe and Stanton 2010; Bolger, Zuckerman, and Kessler 2000; Mathews and Green 2010). Furthermore, consumers may experience guilt or shame at the thought of burdening a help provider and taking resources that could otherwise be useful to others. So the process and decision to seek help has important implications for research related to self-efficacy, interpersonal relationships, and use of shared resources.

Second, given that the decision to seek help may determine whether or not goals are achieved, an understanding of help seeking behavior will contribute to a general theory of goal seeking and factors that influence goal completion. Research on goals has largely focused on goal setting and the goal striving process (Bargh, Gollwitzer, and Oettingen 2010; Oettingen and Gollwitzer 2001). Drawing on goal systems approaches that synthesize how means and goals work together in activating each other (Kruglanski and Kopetz 2009; Simon and Newell 1971), the present paper focuses on help seeking as a viable means to attain goals. For instance, consumers can use help seeking as a means for finding products and services, fixing product malfunctions, obtaining information about proper medical procedures, or utilizing appropriate financial services. Importantly, the decision to ask for help often involves satisfying or compromising multiple goals. While seeking help may enable one to reach otherwise unreachable goals, doing so often puts oneself at risk of being rejected, becoming indebted and dependent, appearing uncertain, unsure, or needy, exposing weakness, and exploiting others' time, money, and effort (Butler 1998; Greenberg and Westcott 1983; Merton, Merton, and Barber 1983; Nadler 1987; Nadler 1991). Likewise, help-seeking consumers often need to make tradeoffs between goals related to one's identity, maintenance of perceptions by others, and use of shared resources. Thus, understanding help seeking behavior has the potential to offer significant contributions to these areas.

Dissertation Overview

The goal of this dissertation is to contribute to our understanding of the factors that influence when and how consumers are likely to seek and avoid seeking help. To do so, I first provide a theoretical framework that lays out the broad categories of variables that influence consumer help-seeking decisions. Then, I explore a number of these factors in depth. I offer empirical evidence from eight experimental studies that explore a few of the discussed factors in depth and offer support for the framework.

Essay 1 provides the conceptual framework covering important factors that influence consumers' problem perception, the help-seeking process, and strategies to aid this process. Despite a wide variety of help-seeking contexts and needs, the general steps in the decision processes are largely the same for different kinds of help-seeking. The present paper focuses on these common steps. In short, consumers formulate a goal, or a desired end state when they recognize a problem and become motivated to solve it. Goal achievement requires generation or consideration of potential means, which tend to be considered at the start of goal-striving and during goal-pursuit. These means may include strategies whereby consumers use their own effort and resources, but may also include soliciting effort and resources from others. As with the decision to use any means, the costs and benefits of utilizing each strategy are considered. The decision to ask for help involves a specific set of costs and benefits related to perceptions of the self and perceptions of others (i.e. personal mastery goal, interpersonal judgment and fairness, and expedient need). Importantly, such cost-benefit analysis can be manipulated using

different strategies, such as verbal framing of the help sought, disclosure of relevant self or task information, and orientation toward learning.

Essay 2 focuses on a specific context to explore how contextual cues in the help seeking environment influence perceptions of norms for help-seeking, and how concerns about negative judgements for violating perceived norms may influence the decision to ask for help. Here, I focus on how features of consumers' questions can influence their decision to seek help using online product forums (studies 1 and 2). Consumers are often concerned with others' perceptions when seeking help in public settings. To accurately identify the specific social judgment that hinders consumers' help-seeking decisions, I examine several factors that could mitigate consumers' reluctance: public self-assessment of one's own question (studies 3, 4, and 8), public acknowledgment of one's achievements in other domains (study 5), the communal norm of the forum (study 6), and the ability to reward the potential help-givers (study 7 and 8). By exploring these mechanisms, I aim to contribute a better understanding of specific features of help-seeking platforms that may address concerns of social judgment. This work has the potential to help marketers recognize and mitigate context-relevant social and emotional barriers to seeking help and facilitate consumer help-seeking decisions. With this knowledge, marketers may also enrich help-platforms in ways consumers will truly appreciate while also facilitating the development of consumers' lasting relationships with each other and with the firm. In the next section I review the literature on help seeking and develop a model of help-seeking behavior.

Background on Help-Seeking in Literature

The majority of business literature research related to decisions to seek help has focused on consumers' decisions about and responses to advice from others. For instance, research has investigated how consumers evaluate and choose among pieces of advice that often contradict each other to make their own product judgments and decisions (Broniarczyk and West 1998; Feick and Higie 1992; Gershoff, Broniarczyk, and West 2001; Gershoff, Mukherjee, and Mukhopadhyay 2003). Other research has examined how consumers' responses to advice depends on the advisor's characteristics, such as trustworthiness and expertise (Jungermann and Fischer 2005; Sniezek, Schrah, and Dalal 2004), as well as how emotion influences advice-taking behaviors, such as anger, gratitude, pride, anxiety, or shame (Gino and Schweitzer 2008; Gino, Wood Brooks, and Schweitzer 2012; Hooge, Verlegh, and Tzioti 2014). Moreover, researchers have also examined how consumers respond to advice differently depending on the characteristics of the advice given (Patt, Bowles, and Cash 2006), characteristics of the decision context (Goldsmoth 2000; Gardner and Berry 1995), characteristics of the advisor (Hofmann, Lei, and Grant 2009; Yaniv and Kleinberger 2000), and characteristics of the advice recipient (See et al. 2011; Tost, Gino, and Larrick 2012). Also, researchers have examined how recommendations of others affect product search decisions (Dellaert and Haubl 2011).

Recently, researchers have begun to investigate the critical decision that precedes the process of responding to advice— the decision to seek advice. Research has investigated how consumers search product information from other consumers' reviews

(Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, and Gremler 2004; Lin, Lu, and Wu 2012), and how asking for advice changes the perceived competence of the advice-seeker (Brooks, Gino, Schweitzer 2015). In addition, consumers are more likely to seek advice when they are uncertain about their initial decision (Cooper 1991; Gibbons, Sniezek, and Dalal 2003), when they feel anxious (Gino, Brooks, and Schweitzer 2012), when the cost of seeking advice is low, and when the problem is complex (Sniezek and Buckley 1995; Schrah, Dalal, and Sniezek 2006). While research findings on advice-seeking are informative in understanding the help-seeking process, help-seeking behaviors encompass broader behaviors than just advice-seeking (Brooks, Gino, and Schweitzer 2015).

Consumers often seek help in finding and choosing the products or resources that can meet their needs, understanding ways to use products to their full potential, resolving product malfunctions or service failures, and figuring out whether there is available help or possible solutions to the encountered problem. Despite the importance of help seeking behavior in marketing contexts, the majority of work that directly examines help seeking has been explored in other research domains including psychology, sociology, education, medical, social work, and public policy literature. To better understand consumer help-seeking behaviors in the marketing context, below I synthesize theoretical discussions and empirical findings from other disciplines to present a comprehensive model of consumer help-seeking behaviors.

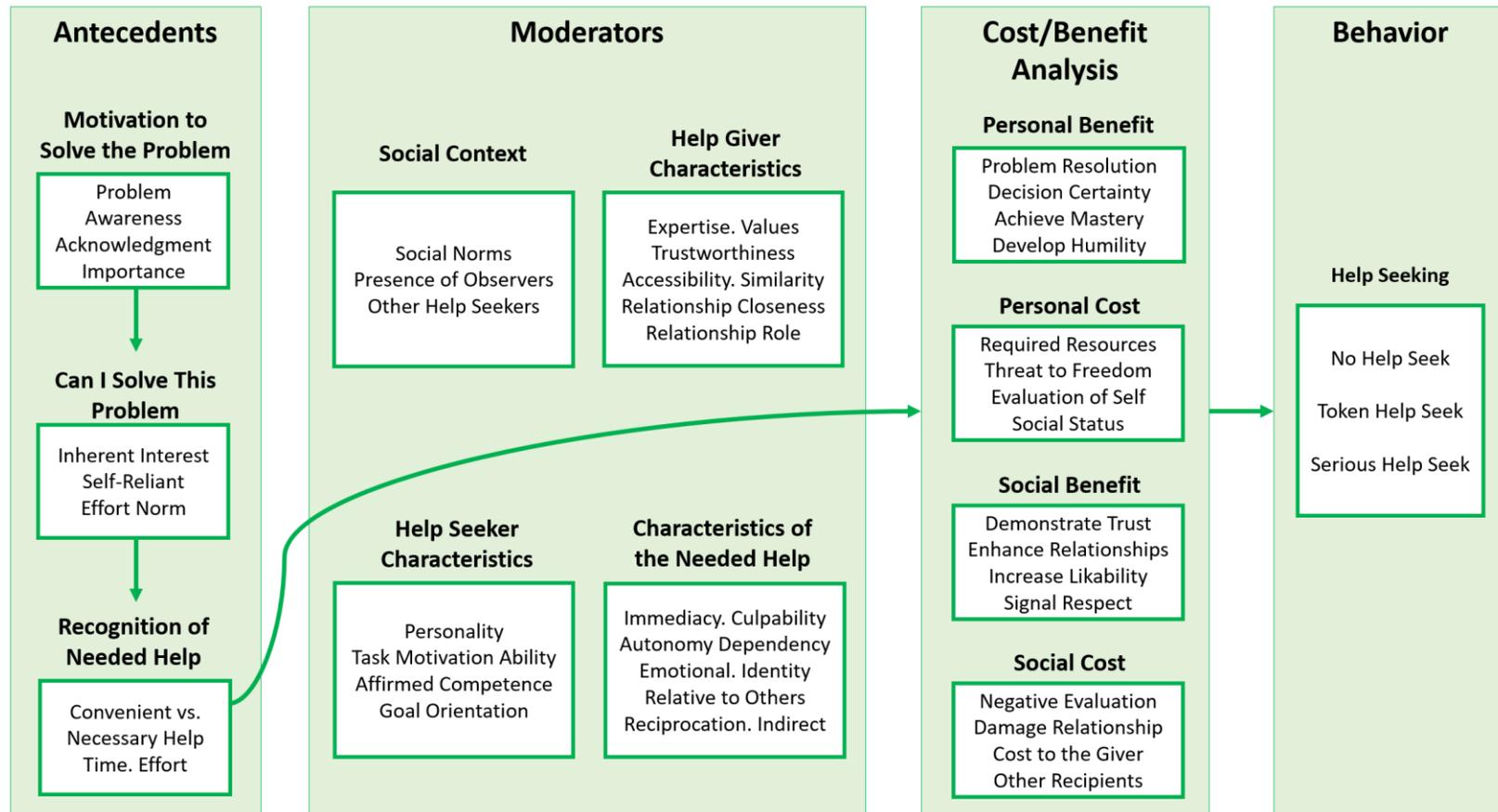


Figure 1. Consumer Help-Seeking Model.

Help-Seeking Decision Process Model

In order for a consumer to initiate the help-seeking process, he or she needs to have sufficient motivation to solve the encountered problem. Then, a consumer needs to recognize the problem as something that he or she cannot solve alone and acknowledge that help is needed from other people. Despite a consumer's acknowledgement of the needed help, he or she may not seek help if the perceived psychological, personal, and social costs of seeking help is greater than the benefits of solving the problem. To alleviate these costs, a consumer can use strategies and tactics in seeking help to ensure he or she gets the most effective and efficient help. Below, I elaborate on the sequential steps that depend on a variety of factors.

Step 1: Consumers' Motivation to Solve a Problem

The consumers' help seeking process starts from a motivation to solve an encountered problem. For such motivation to occur, consumers must first be aware of a suboptimal state, acknowledge that state as a problem, and evaluate the problem as important. For instance, for consumers to seek help with computer malfunctions, they need to first be aware of an abnormality in their computer's functioning and acknowledge it as a problem that is important to solve. Below, I elaborate on each component to demonstrate how each ultimately contributes to consumers' motivation to solve a problem.

Awareness of a Suboptimal State. The help-seeking decision process typically begins with consumers' awareness of a state that is different from what they would like it

to be. The stimuli that trigger awareness of a problem may be subtle and accumulate over time, or they may be powerful and precipitously impinge on an individual (Gross and McMullen 1983). Consumers are constantly bombarded with stimuli and experiences, which means that potential problems may go unnoticed (Malhotra 1984).

Acknowledgment of the State as a Problem. Even when consumers are aware of a state that is suboptimal, unexpected, or abnormal, they may not perceive it as a problem. Yet, they must recognize or define it as a problem to do something about it (Depaulo, Nadler, and Fisher 1983). Consumers' previous experiences, cultural upbringing, and values reinforced by reference groups may lead them to regard the issue as normal or, at least, not abnormal enough for careful attention (Mechanic 1968; Zola 1966). For instance, what is regarded as a problem that requires action for a consumer living in a highly developed metropolitan area (e.g. "My phone doesn't have enough convenient apps!") is likely to be different from that of a consumer living in the countryside. Similarly, what is regarded as a problem by a consumer who is communally minded (e.g. "I need better ways to deeply connect with my family, friends, and other people in my community") is likely to be different from that of someone who is individualistic. Evidence suggests that the lower one's social class is, the less likely a given symptom will be perceived to require attention or professional assistance (Antonovsky and Harrtman 1974; Hollingshead and Redlich 1958; Keller and McDade 2000). Whether someone regards a particular state as a problem depends on their cultural and psychological classification of the situation, which, in turn, determines whether they view it as something that requires careful attention.

Importance of a Problem. Once consumers define the suboptimal state as a problem, they must evaluate it as important and relevant enough for them to exert time and effort to attempt to resolve it (Depaulo, Nadler, and Fisher 1983). The mere realization of an unusual or problematic state is often insufficient to lead a consumer to decide to take action and seek help.

Cost-Benefit Analysis regarding Problem Resolution Initiation

When calibrating the importance and relevance of the problem, consumers naturally gauge the benefits of solving and costs of not solving the problem. For example, if the benefit of fixing a randomly blinking laptop screen problem is less than the cost of taking time away from getting twenty things done at work, then consumers may not try to fix their laptop. If the benefit of having perfectly cooked rice for tomorrow's dinner party is greater than the cost of spending time and effort solving the rice cooker malfunction, then consumers are more likely to take action to fix the problem. While consumers will usually take time to gauge the benefit of solving and the cost of not solving the problem, they are more likely to take immediate action and potentially seek help when they realize that avoiding it has dire consequences, such as threatening safety, health, or achievement of important and immediate goals. That is, when the problem-solving task is perceived as urgent, consumers are more likely to readily seek help, seek more help, and seek it sooner (Butler 1998).

Thus, the cost-benefit analysis regarding a problem's potential resolution determines the consumers' motivation to alleviate a current problem and attain the

desirable end state. Once consumers have clearly recognized the benefits of solving the problem, they will start to consider different avenues or means to achieve their desired states – including whether to solve the problem on their own or to seek help from others.

Step 2: Consideration of Solving the Problem on One's Own

In many cases, consumers will first consider solving the problem on their own before considering options in seeking help from someone else. By solving the problem on their own, consumers avoid the costs of determining potential sources of help, and costs associated with obtaining it, so they may solve the problem faster and with fewer costs overall. Solving a problem on one's own has other benefits as well including innate enjoyment in exploring objects and situations, desire for independent achievements, and satisfying need to be seen as a responsible member of society. These I expand on below.

First, consumers may be interested in the problem-solving process for its own sake due to an innate desire to explore objects and situations (Deci 1971). Problem-solving tendencies start from a very early age, especially when a child develops curiosity toward objects and matters in front of them. This momentum is often carried throughout consumers' lives, allowing them to derive enjoyment from the mere act of solving the encountered problems. Many do-it-yourself, or DIY, enthusiasts derive meaning and joy from the process of solving problems on their own and learning from the process. For instance, many consumers purchase products and tools from hardware stores such as Home Depot and Lowes that cost more than they would spend to simply hire a professional to fix plumbing issues in their homes. Even when they encounter multiple

challenges while solving the problem on their own, they may persist in trying to cope with the task, making efforts with minimal assistance of impersonal resources, such as manuals or YouTube videos related to the task (Gross and McMullen 1983).

Second, the need to be self-reliant in achieving a goal can motivate consumers to solve a problem on their own. Humans have an innate need to be in control of their environment and to be autonomous agents of change (Bandura 1977; de Charms 1968; James 1892). While such need is generally prevalent, evidence suggests that some individuals have a stronger need be self-reliant. For instance, individuals with achievement-orientation have strong desires to do things on their own to reach a standard of excellence in the given task (Harris, Tessler, and Potter 1977; Tessler and Schwartz 1972). Culture also influences the need to rely on one's own resources rather than those of others. Compared to individuals in Eastern cultures, Westerners tend to put a strong emphasis on self-sufficiency and independence (Markus and Kitayama 1991).

Third, aside from an individuals' internal motivations to solve a problem without assistance, external factors may also play a role. In particular, expectations of others may influence willingness to seek help either through norms or perceptions of fairness. For example, the well-known motto, "God helps those who help themselves," suggests a cultural norm around the importance of making an effort to achieve desired outcomes for oneself. Similarly, research has shown that people are likely to perceive it as more fair for one to receive help from others when a recipient has first made an effort to provide for themselves. So a people who have not at least made some effort, or who are perceived as lazy and irresponsible, are also perceived as less deserving of help (Furnham 1982;

Lerner and Miller 1978). Thus, even if not stated explicitly, individuals are often expected to make some effort or pay due diligence in solving a problem on one's own.

Cost-Benefit Analysis regarding Self-Reliance vs. Seeking Help

As consumers consider which of the means or strategies they will rely on to achieve a goal or solve a problem, they must consider both the costs in terms of effort and resources (including time, money, energy), the likelihood that the means will lead to successfully achieving the goal or solving the problem, and any ancillary costs or benefits, including opportunity costs of not achieving other goals, as well as associated outcomes such as personal or social judgment. Some problems may be solved alone if sufficient time and effort are expended, while others may be impossible to solve by oneself. While help may be a convenience for the former type of problems, help is necessary for the latter (Gross and McMullen 1983). When assistance from one or more individuals will ease a task that could be accomplished by one person, a consumer will calculate, in time and effort, the costs of solving it independently without seeking convenient help – “it will take me 15 hours to do it myself.” The problems that require necessary help are conditions that demand special expertise (e.g. medical, mechanical, etc.), tasks requiring more than one individual (e.g. lifting a large object), and situations requiring an instrument to reach a goal that is not available to the needy individual (e.g. money to buy food). In both convenient and necessary help instances, a consumer will gauge the costs of continued self-help and the benefit of seeking help from someone else and decide their next course of action.

Step 3: Consideration of Seeking Help from Another Person

When individuals are confronted with complex situations and problems that they cannot solve on their own, they often try to make sense of the situation and reach resolution by turning to other people for information, help, and advice (Allen 1977; McKnight and Peet, 2000; Mintzberg 1973; Pelz and Andrews 1966; Spath and Buttlar 1996; Urquhart and Crane 1994). Engaging in interpersonal communication allows individuals to understand the problem and the needed course of actions (Maitlis 2005; Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005).

Once consumers recognize a need to seek help, they are likely to consider the costs and benefits of doing so (Ashford and Cummings 1983; Hofmann, Lei, and Grant 2009; Morrison 2002; Morrison and Vancouver 2000). When consumers make the decision to seek help, they are hoping to change their current state to a more desirable one. Yet, consumers are likely to also anticipate a wide range of personal and social costs in seeking help, which could make them reluctant to seek help. Because consumers will be more likely to seek help when they believe the benefits exceed the costs (Grant and Ashford 2008; Lee 1997, 2002), marketers need to understand the factors involved in the cost-benefit analysis in order to influence help-seeking behaviors. Thus, I discuss key influencers of consumer help-seeking decisions: how the decision is influenced by 1) perceived personal benefits, such as gaining problem resolution, increased certainty and decreased responsibility in one's course of action, and achieving long-term mastery; and 2) perceived social benefits, such as showing respect, appearing likable and competent in

the eye of the help-giver, and forming cooperative relationships; 3) perceived personal costs, such as the required resources (time, money, and effort) and the psychological costs (threats to self-esteem, independent achievements, and competence); and 4) perceived social costs, such as being subjected to interpersonal judgments (social stigma, fairness) and decreased social status. Below I lay out details of each potential personal and social costs and benefits as well as their impacts on consumers' cognition, emotion, and behavior relevant to the help-seeking decision process.

Potential Benefits of Help-Seeking

Perceived Personal Benefits

Consumers can enjoy a number of personal benefits by seeking help from others. These include resolving encountered problems, gaining greater feelings of the certainty of decisions, gaining knowledge or skills that may be applied to future problems, and developing or demonstrating humility.

Problem Resolution. The primary benefit of seeking help is straightforward – problem resolution. In educational settings, students seek academic help to understand the material and get good grades in school. In psychotherapy, clients are seeking treatment to “attain intended changes in behavior and experiences through therapy (p. 79, Grosse Holtforth and Grawe 2002).” Likewise, when consumers make decisions to seek help, they are hoping to change their current state to a more desirable one. For instance, a consumer who successfully seeks and receives help with the sound problem on his computer will be able to enjoy music and other media on his computer. A consumer who

seeks and receives help with her dieting issue will be able to live healthier. A consumer who seeks and receives help with his financial turmoil will be able to live an economically more stable life. Problem resolution through help seeking is especially important when a consumer seeks help for something that he or she could never solve on her own (i.e. necessary help) in comparison with the case that she could have solved if enough time and effort were exerted (i.e. convenient help).

Decision Certainty. A second benefit of seeking help is associated with greater feelings of the appropriateness or accuracy of decisions. So an individual may feel greater certainty in a decision, dilute responsibility for potential outcomes, and have external justification for one's preferred outcomes. In a study involving health professionals, researchers found that sometimes doctors asked other doctors for their opinion and formed a final opinion by taking a weighted average of his or her prior opinion and the colleague's advice (Hogarth and Einhorn 1992). The weight given to the advice depended on the person's sensitivity to new information as well as the credibility of the source of the new information (e.g., the colleague's seniority; Birnbaum and Stegner 1979). Seeking and taking others' advice in forming judgment increased certainty and diluted responsibility in their decision (Harvey and Fischer 1997). At other times, individuals may seek help to justify one's preferred outcomes. That is, individuals are more likely to take the advisor's opinion into account when it is in line with their prior belief, regardless of the level of authoritative guidance (Kennedy, Kleinmuntz, and Peecher 1997).

Achieve Mastery. A third benefit of seeking help includes gaining knowledge or skills that may be applied to future problems. In such a case, one may value receiving

help beyond the immediate benefit because they are able to learn the skills from others while receiving help. This is especially likely when consumers seek autonomy-oriented help, such as asking someone how to catch a fish, compared to when they seek dependency-oriented help, such as asking someone to catch a fish for them (Nadler and Halabi 2006). A complete dependence on the help-giver will not allow consumers to achieve mastery relevant to the outcome. However, with a bit of assistance from the help-giver, consumers will be able to master relevant skills, which will increase the likelihood of reaching the desired outcome on their own in the future.

Develop Humility. A fourth benefit of asking for help is to develop or demonstrate humility. When an individual displays a penchant to learn from others, they are more likely to become a humble person (Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez 2004). Humility is characterized as decreased self-focus (Chancellor and Lyubomirsky 2013) and increased focus on other people (Davis, Worthington, and Hook 2010). When a person seeks help from others, they are recognizing the strengths and values of others, which is a strong trait held by humble people (Davis et al., 2011). Humble individuals also display a transparent disclosure of personal limits, which is required when seeking help from others. Another important expression of humility is teachability, which is showing openness to learning from others and willingness to ask for help (Owens, Johnson, and Mitchell 2013; Tangney 2000; Templeton 1997). Thus, when a consumer seeks help from others, they are likely to gain qualities of a humble person, as well as gain the social benefit of communicating to another that he or she has something of value to offer.

Perceived Social Benefits

Beyond having a problem resolved, there are a number of social benefits that can be derived from asking others for help. These include demonstrating trust, forming or enhancing social relationships, increasing interpersonal liking, and signaling respect.

Demonstrate Trust. First, when asking others for help, consumers may initiate interaction based on trust in the potential giver. The act of seeking help shows that one is able to be vulnerable and reveal one's weakness. A person who is able to be vulnerable is often trusted by others. Also, help-seeking assumes that the seeker trusts the potential help-giver to some degree. Thus, help-seeking makes trust possible for both the help-seeker and the potential help-giver. In fact, trust can be defined as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party (p712, Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995)." Researchers have found that trust can lead to cooperative behavior among individuals, groups, and organizations (Jones and George 1998; McAllister 1995). Likewise, seeking help can foster trust and cooperative behaviors.

Enhance Social Relationships. A strong community can be formed from interpersonal relationships that are fostered through help seeking and giving. Going beyond cooperative behaviors, consumers could form genuine community among people who are willing to respond to their needs and provide help. In such genuine community, individuals give relationship benefits to others unconditionally and are more concerned with need than equality (Beck and Clark 2010; Clark 1984; Fiske 1992). Therefore,

members of the community respond to each other's needs with great empathy and behave in ways that maximizes the interest of others (Clark and Mills 1993). In such communal community, individuals naturally reciprocate the received help to show appreciation and how much they value the giver and the relationship. As consumers seek help, they can foster interdependence and connection to others (Johnson and Grimm 2010).

Increased Likability. Despite popular belief that potential help-givers may judge the help-seeker negatively, evidence suggests that the seekers are likely to be judged positively by the giver. Compared to when one does not ask for help, help seeking initiates a social interaction. Thus, seeking help is likely to increase opportunities for the seeker to communicate with others, get to know them, decrease necessary formality in future interactions, and potentially increase liking. Mere Exposure effect shows that people generally like others whom they have become familiar with compared to strangers (Zajonc 1968, 2001). Moreover, according to the Benjamin Franklin Effect, people come to like those whom they have given help to (Jecker and Landy 1969). As people reflect on reasons why they helped someone, they come to conclusion that they did so because they like them (Becher 2011). Not only that, the givers are also likely to feel flattered by the seeker's choice to seek help from them over other potential givers. Thus, they tend to believe that the seeker is competent for choosing them as the potential help-provider (Brooks, Gino, and Schweitzer 2015).

Signal Respect. When a consumer seeks help from another person, he or she is acknowledging that the giver has resources (e.g. physical, intellectual, or emotional) that the seeker finds valuable. By doing so, the seeker could communicate the respect that

they have for the giver. Thus, even though the giver may need to exert time and effort to benefit the receiver, the giver may also feel that he or she has received valuable respect and trust from the seeker. When individuals feel appreciated and valued by others, they are more likely to perform favors for those others in the future (Algoe, Haidt, and Gable 2008). Therefore, seeking help could communicate value that the seeker sees in the giver, which could make the potential giver feel respected, allowing the giver to joyfully provide help.

Potential Costs of Help-Seeking

Perceived Personal Costs

Despite personal and social benefits in seeking help, evidence suggests that consumers are reluctant to seek help because they perceive personal costs. These may include costs associated in requiring resources, threats to personal freedom, diminished view of self, and social status.

Required Resources in Seeking Help. While seeking help can solve the problem, consumers need to first take time and effort to seek help. They need to take time to understand who would be the most helpful person to ask. To do so, consumers need to find possible resources for help, consider characteristics of the help giver, and tangible costs involved in getting help (i.e. time, money, and effort). Even when consumers recognize the importance of seeking help, they may not be able to seek help from others if they cannot exert their resources to seek help. So a potential cost of seeking help that

might diminish the likelihood that one asks for assistance, is the very cost of finding and implementing that assistance.

Threat to Freedom. A second potential cost associated with help seeking is the perceived threat to personal freedom. Consumers may resist seeking help, because they may feel obligated to follow the others' guidance. Consumers' desire to maintain freedom of choice can result in a negative psychological state (e.g., reactance theory, Brehm 1966; Brehm and Brehm 1981). Consumers' desire to restore freedom in choosing their course of action may make them even more resistant to seeking help (Clee and Wicklund 1980; Fitzsimons and Lehmann 2004).

Seeker's Evaluation of Self. A third potential cost of help-seeking is that they may come to view themselves less positively. So consumers may be reluctant to seek help when they perceive that doing so indicates a lack of autonomy, persistence, or achievement. The act of seeking help makes consumers' dependence on the potential help-giver salient. They may be hesitant to admit the need for help, because they do not want to view themselves as dependent or incompetent. Consumers may feel a threat to their self-esteem or self-worth in admitting to limitations in their self-sufficiency or personal abilities (Fisher, Nadler, Witcher, and Alogna 1982). This is especially likely when consumers believe that the majority of other people do not experience similar difficulties (Tessler and Schwartz 1972) and their problem is in an area central to their view of themselves (Nadler 1987).

Social Status. A fourth potential cost of help-seeking is diminished social status. When one requests help, he or she is also communicating a belief that the potential

provider may have something that the seeker could not get for him or herself, which could imply that the seeker is somehow inferior to the giver (Nadler 2002). Individuals actively attempt to make sense of the helping relationship (Jones and Davis 1965; Kelley 1967). As they strive to understand the situation in which they need to show dependency, they may feel threatened if they feel it reflects their inferior social status. People like to view themselves as capable and autonomous beings, so they distance themselves from activities that represent the antithesis of these qualities (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Consedine and Moskowitz 2007; Tracy and Robins 2007). When help seeking is perceived to diminish one's status, then consumers are less likely to seek help.

Perceived Social Costs

Aside from personal costs, consumers could also become reluctant to seek help when they perceive social costs. These social costs may include being negatively judged by others, damaging their relationship with the potential or existing help providers, burdening the helper, and limiting resources for other needy individuals.

Negative Evaluations. First, a potential concern in seeking help from others are judgments that others may form about the help-seeker. In some cases, there may be stigma attached to seeking help such as being labeled as a person in need (Rosen 1983). As discussed above, help-seeking decisions assume an unequal status between the seeker and the giver. The seeker must reveal his or her relative incompetence and dependence (Druian and DePaulo 1977; Karabenick and Knapp 1988), which could not only threaten the seeker's positive self-views, but also cause others to negatively judge the seeker's

ability and character (Ashford, Blatt, and Van de Walle 2003; Grant and Ashford 2008). Research has shown that individuals are reluctant to seek help because they are afraid of being subjected to others' judgments, such as being evaluated as incompetent (Karabenick and Knapp 1988; Lee 1997), dependent upon others (Druian and DePaulo 1977; DePaulo and Fisher 1980), powerless (Lee 2002), or inferior (Ames and Lau 1982). Consumers also take into account whether they will be treated fairly when receiving the help that they asked for. If they believe that the help-giver will be condescending or treat them in ways that they do not deserve to be treated, then they may be less likely to seek help. People are highly motivated to avoid threats to their public image (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Consedine et al. 2007; Tracy and Robins 2007), so the potential social cost of seeking help may lead people to avoid doing so (Morrison and Vancouver 2000; Ryan, Hicks, and Midgley 1997; Williams and Williams 1983).

Damage Relationships. Second, consumers may be reluctant to seek help if they feel that doing so could damage their relationship with the potential help provider or existing help providers. Consumers may worry that they are burdening the potential help provider by seeking help. People often feel obligated to comply with requests (e.g. foot in the door compliance, Freedman and Fraser 1966). Therefore, even when people are not comfortable providing help, they may comply but may feel put upon or exploited in doing so. Knowing this, consumers may feel reluctant to seek help to prevent potential damage to an on-going relationship. In some cases, consumers may feel bad asking for help from someone when they are already getting help from someone else. For instance, consumers may benefit from seeking help from multiple sources when dealing with high-

risk and high-consequence decisions, such as their health and financial decisions.

However, researchers found that consumers are reluctant to seek additional advice, if they have an ongoing relationship with one expert service provider (Schwartz, Luce, and Ariely 2011). Consumers are concerned about offending their primary care doctor when seeking a second opinion from different doctors to confirm their primary care doctor's diagnosis of health symptoms.

Cost to the Potential Help-Giver. Third, when a person seeks help, he or she is asking someone else to exert time, effort, and resources to provide assistance (DePaulo 1983). As social beings, consumers also take that "imposition" into account and consider whether the cost that others incur is reasonable; in other words, people are concerned about fairness and how their actions influence perceptions of fairness in interpersonal dynamics. The norm of equity, the extent to which an individual is expected to behave in a fair manner, is pervasive in interpersonal relationships. Equity theories note that consumers have an innate desire to maintain equity in interpersonal relations (Greenberg and Westcott 1983). Inequitable relationships produce distress and feelings of indebtedness (Husman, Hatfield, and Miles 1987; Greenberg 1980). When reciprocation is not possible, people avoid seeking help (Clark, Gotay, and Mills 1974; DePaulo 1978). They have an easier time asking for help when the cost to others is minimal but hesitate to do so when the cost is high (Shapiro 1980). For instance, the request to donate blood or organs incurs much greater cost than the request to help move a box from one room to another. Also, a spontaneous request for help is likely to incur greater cost than the request that was made a week beforehand, because the help-giver has to change his or her

prior plans to provide help. If the cost is high, then the real ability to provide incentives for the helper is likely to lead to a decision to seek help (Gross and Somersan 1974).

Cost for Other Potential Recipients. Fourth, consumers are also likely to take into account the potential consequences of their help seeking for other potential recipients (Brickman, Kidder, Coates, Rabinowitz, Cohn, and Karuza 1983). Consumers are more likely to feel comfortable seeking help when the type and degree of help that they are seeking from the potential help-giver is fair in the eye of the giver as well as other potential recipients. For instance, if a consumer realizes that many other consumers who are similarly in need, or in much greater need than the consumer, must wait a long time while he or she receives help, then the consumer may feel that their action is not fair for other potential recipients (i.e. concerns regarding impinging on others' rights). Or, if a consumer realizes that the help is available for only a very limited amount of time and feels that others could use the available help more effectively, then the consumer may not seek help due to fairness concern (i.e. effectiveness concern). On the other hand, if consumers see that others have received a lot of help, and they have received very little so far, then they may be more likely to ask for help.

Moderators of Cost-Benefit Analysis

Given that consumers are likely to weigh both personal and social costs and benefits in deciding to seek help, it is also important to understand factors that may influence their evaluation of these costs and benefits. An important overarching factor, in addition to the value of receiving help to achieve a given goal, is that consumers are

likely to be influenced by other motivations and goals at the same time (Dhar and Simonson 1999; Fishbach and Dhar 2005, 2008; Laran and Janiszewski 2009; Okada 2005; Novemsky and Dhar 2005; Zhang, Fishbach, and Dhar 2008). For instance, a consumer may want to achieve a goal of having a bookshelf, but one may also want to achieve other goals, such as learning new skills in carpentry, maintaining self-esteem, demonstrating competence, and forming and maintaining relationships. So as a consumer considers means for achieving the bookshelf goal, he or she may consider how his or her competing goals become influenced by seeking help. Depending on the relative value of competing goals one may be more or less likely to seek help. That is, alternative motivations and goals may affect how consumers interpret the costs and benefits of help-seeking, which, in turn, influences whether they will seek help at all.

Importantly, four important categories of factors are likely to determine which competing goals become salient. These include factors associated with the social context, the help-giver, the help-seeker, and the needed help. Below I provide detail about these classes of factors that influence help-seeking decisions.

Social Context Factors

Social contexts refers to the immediate social or physical environment in which people interact with others. The interaction may occur in person or through communication media, in a presence of others in a shared physical space or psychological presence of others. Research on social context factors has found that different types of

social norms and presence of others can influence the seeker's willingness to seek help. I elaborate on each factor below.

Social Norms

Perceived social norms have a significant influence on help-seeking decisions and often override other influences (Deutsch and Gerard 1955). Social norms are rules that guide behaviors in public settings, including expected actions, speech, use of language, and prohibited behaviors (Brennan et al. 2013). Norms may be influenced by one's nationality of origin, geographical location, race, ethnicity, gender, generation, religion, and socioeconomic status. In public settings, people observe others' behaviors in that environment to understand how they are expected to behave. Norms could manifest themselves as injunctive or descriptive norms, the two types of norms overarching many different kinds of context-specific or cultural norms. Injunctive norms are people's perceptions of what behaviors are approved of or disapproved of by others, while descriptive norms are people's perceptions of how people actually behave (Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren 1990). Whether the norm is manifested as injunctive or descriptive, many different kinds of context-specific or cultural norms can affect consumers' help-seeking decisions. These include norms associated with autonomy, competence, and relationships.

Autonomy Norm. Autonomy norm refers to the extent an individual is expected to perform tasks and achieve goals on their own. In situations where autonomy norms are heightened, individuals may be less likely to seek help, as they attempt to perform the task and reach goals on their own. For instance, on airplanes, it is a norm that consumers

put their own luggage in overhead bins and buckle their own seat belts. The autonomy norm is heightened in performance contexts, because people are expected to perform the task on their own. For example, in computer games with clear performance measures, consumers reported that their autonomy was threatened when anthropomorphized computer helpers assisted the game progress, which decreased their enjoyment of the game (Kim, Chen, and Zhang 2016). Thus, consumers may avoid seeking help to maintain their autonomy. Moreover, certain social groups may hold stronger autonomy norm than others. For instance, gender groups often differ in terms of how much they are expected to do things on their own. In some cultures, males are expected to show masculinity by being self-reliant in dealing with hardships, which prevents them from seeking help in situations of need (Addis and Mahalik 2003). Likewise, contexts that heighten the autonomy norm will reduce consumers' likelihood of seeking help or change the amount of help requested.

Competence Norm. Competence norms refer to the extent an individual is expected to have particular skills or abilities that he or she can apply to solving task-related problems. For example, in advanced business school courses, students are expected to be able to use spreadsheets to perform basic calculations. Competence is particularly important to personal self-esteem in social settings (Tafarodi and Swann 1995; Rucker, Hu, and Galinsky 2014). Since a consumer's lack of knowledge becomes readily apparent when asking a question, the norm of competence is likely to be one of the main concerns for consumers using public platforms (Otero and Graesser 2001). Situation-specific goals can heighten consumers' need for such competence (Ames and

Archer 1987; McClelland 1955). If consumers' purpose for engaging in a task is to demonstrate competence, then they will interpret help-seeking as a sign of incompetence, which deters them from seeking help (Dweck and Elliott 1983).

Relational Norm. Relational norms define the type of relationship that a help-seeker should have with a potential help-giver (Aggarwal 2004). For instance, relational norms for strangers tend to limit help seeking to minor requests for resources, effort, or time, such as providing directions, or holding an elevator. Yet, transactional relationships, such as paying someone for help, legitimize seeking more significant time, effort, or resources (Marcoux 2009). A communal orientation to relationships is characterized by unconditional emotional engagement with the needs and interests of others, even in response to strangers (Clark and Mills 1993). Accordingly, communal relationships established through norms emphasize behaviors that increase interdependence (Johnson and Grimm 2010). In communal relationships people give benefits to others to demonstrate a concern for them and to attend to their needs—taking a perspective that transcends emphasis on self-interest alone. Certain cultures employ a stronger communal norm than others. In Western cultures, seeking help can signal dependence, incompetence, and inferiority. Yet, in Eastern cultures, seeking help can signal interdependence, attempts to make an effort, and a desire for collaboration (Lee 1997; Markus and Kitayama 1991). Therefore, individuals tend to be less likely to seek help in independent cultures – even when they do seek help, they would ask for partial assistance, rather than completely depending on others (Komissarouk and Nadler 2014).

Altering the Social Norm. Given that social norms may influence the decision to seek help, so to might the encouragement to address violation of norms. For instance, help seeking decisions can be influenced by how the social context allows consumers to prevent potential judgment by others. Symbolic interactionist theory suggests that as individuals create meaning for situations, others, and themselves, they both interpret and define others' actions, and they also actively manage and transform how their own actions are to be interpreted by others (Charon 2004; Blumer 1969). For instance, consumers may be more willing to seek help if the social context allows consumers to define forthcoming conduct as not relevant to the kind of negative judgment that others may hold (Hewitt and Stokes 1975). Individuals could display in their speech the expectation of possible responses of others to their impending conduct, with the aim of diminishing the social cost of the infraction (Cheng and Ching 2016; Hewitt and Stokes 1975). This serves to dissociate one's identity from the statement's specific content, and actively manage the inferred meaning of his or her violation of a norm when seeking help (Lewin 1958; Goodman 2014; Ross and Nisbett 2011; Stapleton 2015). Likewise, consumers can use different kinds of strategies to alter the social norm, which can influence their decision to seek help.

Social norms are not limited to the ones discussed above. Each social context and situation creates unique social norms, depending on the distinct backgrounds and characteristics of people who are present in the space. There are instances when the mere presence of other people can influence consumers' help-seeking decisions, as discussed below.

Presence of Audience

The presence of an audience, aside from the help-giver, also influences consumers' calculation of cost-benefit analysis in seeking help. People are more reluctant to seek help in public contexts than in private ones, because public settings heighten consumers' concern about others' negative judgments (Shapiro 1983). That is, in public settings, the help seeking consumer is subjected to the judgment of not only the potential help-giver, but also others who are present in that environment. Such concern is likely to make consumers feel more embarrassed, because help seeking could communicate undesired information about oneself to others and be a threat to an individual's presented self (Keltner and Buswell 1997; Miller and Leary 1992). Embarrassment plays a powerful role in regulating social behavior (Modigliani 1971), making the behavior less likely when anticipated embarrassment is greater (Goffman 1956). For instance, consumers are less likely to purchase an embarrassing product in the presence of others (Dahl, Manchanda, and Argo 2001). Similarly, consumers are likely to be reluctant to seek help in the presence of others.

Presence of Observers. The influence of others' presence also depends on who those others are. When people are seeking help in the presence of strangers, they are more likely to be concerned about their judgment. When people do not have sufficient information about a person, any simple behavior can define the impression of that person (Higgins, Rholes, and Jones 1977; Hogarth and Einhorn 1992). Thus, when the observers do not have any information about a help seeker, the only information that the observers have is the fact that this person is seeking help. Therefore, strangers could quickly label

the help seeker as a “person in need.” However, when a consumer seeks help in the presence of his or her close friends, then he or she will likely feel more comfortable seeking help than being in the presence of strangers. Because close friends have a wide range of information about the help seeker, the fact that he or she is seeking help does not define who that person is. Therefore, the observers will not quickly label the help seeker, and the help seeker is free from potential negative judgments from these observers.

Presence of Other Help-Seekers. Aside from presence of observers, the presence of other help-seekers may also influence one’s decision to seek help. When consumers need to wait in line to seek help, or when they are seeking help using an online forum, they are in the presence of other help-seeking consumers. Even though others are seeking help, the type of help that a consumer is seeking could make them feel more embarrassed to seek help in the presence of others. Alternatively, the presence of others seeking help may influence how people attribute their inability to reach a goal on their own. So one may attribute inability to the problem rather than to themselves if they perceive others as having similar difficulty (Fiske and Taylor 1991).

Characteristics of the Help Giver

Characteristics of the help-giver can be defined in terms of the help-giver’s internal characteristics, as well as the relationship between the seeker and the helper. Prior work on the characteristics of help-givers has shown that increased expertise, trust, professional role, emotional expressiveness, and accessibility of help-givers influence the likelihood that the seeker will ask for help. These are described below.

Expertise. Literature shows that people prefer to receive help from individuals they perceive to have more expertise and knowledge (Hofmann, Lei, and Grant 2009; Karabenick 2003; Newman and Goldin 1990). Individuals with greater expertise are more capable of solving the encountered problem, as they can provide more useful insights. Thus, experts are likely to be sought out for help more frequently (Morrison and Vancouver 2000; Nadler, Ellis, and Bar 2003). Individuals with more job relevant experience are perceived by others as possessing greater expertise, because those individuals are likely to have greater job knowledge, skills, and techniques that can improve both performance and problem solving (Schmidt, Hunter, and Outerbridge 1986; Seamster et al. 1993; Sonnentag 1998; Sturman 2003). Thus, consumers are likely to seek help from those who have greater expertise.

While expertise signals more valuable knowledge, consumers' help-seeking decisions take other characteristics of the help-provider into account as discussed below. Help-seekers are often reluctant to bother and intrude on experts' busy lives (DePaulo and Fisher 1980). Also, help seekers not only judge whether the help provider has the skills to successfully offer help, but also whether they will act in a way that benefits the seeker (White 2005). Sometimes other characteristics of the help providers, such as accessibility, trustworthiness, and supportive values, could reduce the cost of seeking help to a greater extent than the benefit of getting accurate help from an expert. Thus, perhaps surprisingly, help providers who have limited expertise but are more benevolent and supportive could be preferred over those who have greater expertise.

Supportive Values. Consumers are likely to seek help from people who value being resourceful for others. For instance, students are likely to seek help from teachers who value students' learning and care for their needs (Karabenick and Sharma 1994). In organizational settings, individuals who are more affectively committed to the organization define their roles more broadly to include helping and citizenship behaviors and invest more time and energy in doing so (Meyer et al. 2002). Likewise, when consumers perceive that the help-giver values being resourceful to others, they are more likely to seek help.

Trustworthiness. When consumers trust the help provider, they are more likely to feel safe in being vulnerable and seeking out help. When help-seekers trust potential help providers, they hold positive expectations about the providers' intentions – the trustee wishes the trustor well aside from an egocentric profit motive (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995). Such belief reduces the potential cost of approaching providers (Dutton et al. 1997). When individuals are in a vulnerable state, they are likely to look for cues that signal trustworthiness of the potential help provider. In face-to-face interactions, perceptions of aggression are strongly negatively correlated with trustworthiness perception (Carré, McCormick, and Mondloch 2009). Likewise, using cues that signal trustworthiness, consumers can be selective in seeking help from others.

Accessibility. When consumers perceive that the potential help provider is easily accessible, they are more likely to feel comfortable asking for help (Borgatti and Cross 2003). Accessible help is, by definition, easy and requires less effort to obtain (Hoque and Lohse 1999; O'Reilly 1982). Positive emotional expressions of potential help givers

could signal warmth, likeability, and friendliness (Meyer et al. 2002; Staw, Sutton, and Pelled 1994), which in turn signal accessibility and willingness to provide help (Hofmann, Lei, and Grant 2009).

Similarity. There is mixed evidence regarding how the help-giver's similarity to the help-seeker influences an individual's decision to seek help. One study found that people are more likely to seek help from similar-status peers as compared to higher-status supervisors or lower-status subordinates who are perceived as more likely to evaluate the seeker (Blau 1955). The boss and the subordinate alike could think "I cannot believe you do not know this already!" Thus, seeking help from similar status peer can provide a friendlier environment to seek help. Yet, another study found that seeking help is the most threatening when the helper is perceived as similar to oneself (Nadler 1987). When the person providing help is similar to the seeker, the social comparison could become readily salient (Festinger 1954; Goethals and Darley 1977; Suls, Martin, and Wheeler 2002) – "if we share so much in common, why do I need help when he can figure things out on his own?" Thus, shared similarities with the help-provider may facilitate or hinder help-seeking decisions.

Relationship Closeness. Consumers' help-seeking decisions can also depend on the type of relationship that a help-seeker has with a help-giver. Closer relationships, such as family membership, also legitimize seeking a greater amount of help (Brinberg and Wood 1983; Foa and Foa 1974). In such interdependent relationships, individuals give relationship benefits to others unconditionally and are more concerned with needs and interests of others than equality (Beck and Clark 2010; Clark 1984; Fiske 1992).

Thus, consumers are likely to have an easier time seeking and receiving help from a family member or a friend, partly because they feel less indebted (Bar-Tal, Bar-Zohar, Greenberg, and Hermon 1977) and less threat to self-esteem (Greenberg and Westcott 1983). Yet, if consumers plan to ask for help from a stranger or an acquaintance, then they will be more cautious and feel obligated to reciprocate the received help. Therefore, they will be more likely to limit help seeking to minor requests for resources, effort, or time. Or, they will provide payment for help, legitimizing seeking more significant time, effort, or resources (Clark and Mills 1993; Marcoux 2009). In addition, the evaluation of the helper influences recipients' responses. For example, people are more likely to refrain from seeking help from others with whom they have a conflictive relationship (van Leeuwen, Täuber, and Sassenberg 2011).

Role in the Relationship. Individuals tend to engage in behaviors perceived to be part of their formal role (Hofmann, Morgeson, and Gerras 2003; Morrison 1994). To facilitate help seeking and giving behaviors, many organizations create formal roles. For example, businesses formalize coaching roles (Hackman and Wageman 2005), hospitals formalize nurse preceptor roles (DeCicco 2008), and schools formalize advisor roles. Roles are shared expectations embedded in social positions (Katz and Kahn 1978; Callero 1994). Thus, when potential help providers occupy a formal helping role, individuals are likely to have an easier time seeking help, because providing help is their "job" (Hofmann, Lei, and Grant 2009). Similarly, consumers would be more likely to ask questions about newly arrived computers to a salesperson in a computer store than to a

software developer, because a salesperson is expected to provide help in understanding new products.

Characteristics of the Help Seeker

Research has also shown that characteristics of the help seeker influences help-seeking decisions. These include the help-seeker's personality, task motivation, competence, and goal orientations.

Personality. An individual's personal characteristics can influence how he or she interprets, experiences, and acts in goal pursuits (Dweck 1986). Accordingly, research has found that a variety of personality characteristics influence help seeking decisions (Ashford and Cummings 1983; Ashford and Tsui 1991). For instance, individuals with low perceived control tend to seek help more than those who have high control (Mechanic 1978). Also, individuals seek less help when they are highly private or self-conscious, the extent to which a person generally attends to his or her thoughts, feelings, and mood changes (Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss 1975; Carver and Scheier 1981). Individuals who have a high need for achievement or self-reliance tend to view help-seeking as a threat to their freedom and autonomy and avoid seeking help (Brehm and Brehm 1981; Harris, Tessler, and Potter 1977; Schwartz 1972). Moreover, individuals who possess interdependent construals are more willing to depend on others when seeking help than those with independent construals (Komissarouk and Nadler 2014).

Task Motivation and Ability. Consumers' general motivation as well as their actual and perceived ability in achieving the given task can influence consumer help

seeking decisions. Compared to individuals who have higher motivation and ability in a given task, those who have lower motivation and ability feel more threatened by obstacles and difficulties. Those with lower motivation and ability focus on avoiding failure (McClelland 1955; Butler 2000). Consequently, they not only avoid seeking help, but also strive to conceal their difficulties (Dweck 1986; Marchand and Skinner 2007). Moreover, consumers' belief in their ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task, called self-efficacy (Bandura 1977), influence their decision to seek help. Those with higher self-efficacy for learning set challenging goals, employ what they believe are effective strategies, self-monitor their learning goal progress, make strategy adjustments, and seek help as needed (Schunk and Pajares 2009; Zimmerman and Cleary 2009).

Self-Affirmed Competence. When individuals believe that they are competent in other areas unrelated to the domain of needed help, they could be less concerned about others' negative judgment and be more likely to seek help. By affirming an alternative source of self-integrity, consumers may fulfill the need to protect the self in the face of threat. Self-affirmation theory states that people can respond to a self-image threat by recruiting other resources to maintain an overall positive self-image (Steele 1988). Such self-affirmations include "reflecting on important aspects of one's life irrelevant to the threat, or engaging in an activity that makes salient important values unconnected to the threatening event" (p.186, Sherman and Cohen 2006). Research finds that when another person has unfavorable information about an individual, the individual compensates by enhancing his or her self-descriptions on traits about which the target person did not have

prior information (Baumeister and Jones 1978). Along the same vein, people inherently believe that they can ameliorate the impact of a self-image threat by affirming other aspects of the self (Steele and Liu 1983). When focusing on domains of self-integrity unrelated to the threat, people realize that their self-worth does not hinge on the evaluative implications of the immediate situation. Thus, self-affirmed individuals are likely to be less threatened by implications of seeking help and be more willing to do so.

Goal Orientation. An individual's goal orientation influences their judgments of the cost and benefit of help seeking (Newman 1998). Individuals with performance goals strive to demonstrate their competence relevant to others (Ames 1992). Thus, they tend to avoid help seeking, because they feel threatened by revealing their incompetence (Elliot and Harackiewicz 1996; Middleton and Midgley 1997; Karabenick 2003). Conversely, students who value learning more than performance are more likely to seek help (Newman and Schwanger 1995). Mastery orientation is concerned with gaining or improving one's skill at executing a given task, which encourages adaptive help-seeking (Dweck 1986; Dweck and Leggett 1988; Linnen-Brink 2005). Individuals with mastery orientation tend to seek help more than those with performance orientation, because they interpret help-seeking as a way to develop one's skills for future success. Such adaptive help-seekers request help only when necessary, formulate specific requests that can be additive to their goal attainment, and think through which knowledgeable others from whom to get help (Newman 2008).

Characteristics of the Help Needed

Research has found that characteristics of the needed help influence help-seeking decisions. Need characteristics may include the characteristics of need in and of itself (such as the culpability, immediacy, emotionality, and centrality of need), while other characteristics could be relative to the needs of others, or relative to events that came beforehand or will occur in the future.

Culpability of the Need. The state of need can be attributed to the person who is in need of help (internal attribution) or to situations outside of the needy person's control (external attribution; Kelly 1967). Internal causal factors may include one's laziness or lack of effort, while external causal factors may include natural disaster, unexpected national economic collapse, or accident caused by someone else. Depending on which causal attribution that they make, consumers may calibrate the culpability of their situation of need, which influences their decision to seek help. That is, if consumers feel that the reason why they need help is due to their own errors or poor decisions, then they may be reluctant to seek help. Yet, if consumers feel that the reason why they need help is due to factors outside of their control, then they may not only be more likely to seek help, but may also feel entitled to receive it (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, and Bushman 2004).

Centrality to Self or Identity. Personal identity is defined as representation of one's self as well as one's traits, characteristics, and goals (Oyserman 2009; Tajfel and Turner 1979). When a task or goal is highly relevant to an area central to an individual's self-esteem, then he or she may be less likely to seek help, because doing so is more

likely to be perceived as a threat to that identity (Nadler 1987). For example, a consumer who perceives herself to be a computer guru and identifies with computer geek communities is less likely to seek help with seemingly simple computer problems. However, that same individual may not see herself as a skilled artist, nor have any desire to become one, and so may have little reluctance to seek help with an art project.

Autonomy vs. Dependency Help. Researchers have distinguished between autonomy-oriented help, which refers to the provision of tools or hints that allow recipients to solve their problems on their own, and dependency-oriented help, which refers to the provision of full solutions to a problem (Nadler 2002). For instance, autonomy-oriented help could involve learning how to fish from someone else, while dependency-oriented help could involve asking others to catch a fish on their behalf. Whereas dependency-oriented help may have a higher short-term instrumental value, autonomy-oriented help has a higher educational value, which will reduce the likelihood of needing assistance in the future (Alvarez and van Leeuwen 2011). Literature shows that people are more reluctant to seek dependency- than autonomy-oriented help, because dependency-oriented help emphasizes status inequality between the help seeker and the giver (Nadler, 1997; van Leeuwen, Tauber, and Sassenberg 2011).

Emotional Needs. Consumers' help-seeking decisions are likely to differ based on whether or not the needed help involves great emotional investment. While consumers tend to make logical decisions in seeking help when they need help with cognitive tasks (e.g. solving a math problem or fixing a car), they are more likely to make decisions based on minimizing negative emotions when they need help with situations or things

that require high emotional involvement (e.g. dealing with a traumatizing event or a high stake medical decision; Drolet and Luce 2004). When faced with a problem, the emotional needs of consumers will most likely involve negative emotions rather than positive ones. Consumers tend to have a hard time dealing with negative emotions, and they could respond to them in two different ways. First, consumers may avoid seeking help to simply take their mind off of the emotionally distressing need (Ehrich and Irwin 2005). Or, they may seek the kind of help that could provide them with greater emotional and social support (White 2005). Individuals often seek the social support of others in an attempt to cope with stress (Helgeson 2003; MacGeorge et al. 2004). Social support is conceptualized as a process through which tangible (e.g., financial), emotional (e.g., caring, understanding), and/or informational (e.g., advice) resources are provided to or exchanged with others in an attempt to arrive at a desired state (Cohen, Gottlieb, and Underwood 2000). When seeking help with needs that are emotionally charged, consumers are likely to seek help from benevolent and caring others who are able to provide emotional support (White 2005).

Immediacy of Need. The needed help could be relevant for meeting immediate and urgent needs. When the task must be solved immediately, such expediency drives people to seek help as soon as possible, as much as possible (Butler 1998). However, when the need is not as urgent, consumers may delay help seeking.

Need Relative to Others. Consumers may sometimes juxtapose their need relative to that of others and gauge whether they should seek help or not. Consumers may feel guilty about seeking help if they are aware that others have done the work on their own,

because they would feel that they should also be able to solve it on their own. Or, if consumers realize that others are seeking help with relatively basic tasks, they may be more willing to seek help with a difficult task to signal their competence. Conversely, if they see others seeking help with difficult tasks, they may attempt to dissociate from that group by asking help with an easy task to signal their ignorance with the task (Berger and Heath 2008). Or, if consumers see that the reason why others need help is due to factors that were out of their control, while their need is due to their own fault, then they may feel that others should get help before themselves (i.e. attribution of responsibility). Yet, if consumers see that others have received help multiple times while they have never received help before, then they may be more willing to seek help. Likewise, consumers could gauge their need relative to that of others and legitimize or diminish their help seeking behaviors.

Help Before or After Reciprocation. The timing of the requested help, or the events that precede or follow the request for help can influence a consumer's decision to seek help. Equity theories note that consumers have an innate desire to maintain equity in interpersonal relations (Greenberg and Westcott 1983; Hatfield and Sprecher 1983). When help seekers realize that they receive a more favorable ratio of outcomes to inputs than the person providing help does, the perception of inequity occurs; this results in affective distress, such as feelings of indebtedness or guilt (Greenberg 1980). People want to restore actual or psychological equity by reciprocating. So consumers may be less likely to seek help if the kind of help that they need demands a high cost to the help provider, but may be more likely to seek help if they have already provided a great help

to the person in the past. For example, if a person had already helped a friend move into a new home, then he or she may be more likely to ask that friend for help with his or her upcoming move. Or, consumers may anticipate reciprocation in the future. Here, reciprocation may be directed to the current help-provider or a third party. In one study, participants were given an opportunity to seek help while solving a puzzle. Before solving the puzzle, half of the participants were told that they will be given an opportunity to help other puzzle solvers after solving their own puzzle, while another half of the participants were not told about future opportunity to provide help (Alvarez and van Leeuwen 2015). The result showed that the prospect of providing help to others can alleviate reluctance in seeking help. Thus, while consumers are likely to be reluctant to seek help when reciprocation is not possible (Clark, Gotay, and Mills 1974; DePaulo 1978), they may be more likely to seek help when they have already given help to others or expect to provide help to others in the future.

Indirect Help-Seeking. Alternatively, people sometimes use a quasi-storytelling strategy to evoke comments and suggestions from their listeners without ever directly asking for any help (Blau 1955). Such a strategy could take the form of experience swapping, where individuals disclose their experiences in hopes of obtaining some clue as to how they should solve their own encountered issues by learning from others' experiences (Glidewell, Tucker, Todt, and Cox 1983). Sociolinguistic studies have examined how people use various direct and indirect verbal manipulations to get what they want. Subtle verbal strategies can be used to manipulate a helper to comply with

requests (Ervin-Tripp, Guo, and Lampert 1990; Labov and Fanshel 1977; Read and Chery 1978).

General Discussion

Consumers aspire to improve various areas of their lives, such as health, finances, and emotional security. They often encounter problems in achieving those desired states, and consider different avenues to solve those problems. These avenues may include strategies whereby the consumers use their own effort and resources, but may also include soliciting effort and resources from others. Helping relations is essentially interpersonal phenomena between the helper and the receiver. Existing marketing literature on help-giving decisions allows researchers to understand only one side of the equation. To gain a comprehensive understanding of helping relations, further research is needed to understand consumers' help-seeking decisions.

To stimulate and aid further research in this area, I present a conceptual framework of help-seeking behavior, including the antecedents, moderators, and cost-benefit analysis. This framework is useful in synthesizing insights from different disciplines, such as economics, sociology, public policy, education, social work, medicine, and psychology. By doing so, the framework enables theories to move beyond the boundaries of each discipline and cover important factors that influence the consumer help-seeking process. The decision to ask for help involves costs and benefits in personal and social domains. Importantly, such cost-benefit analysis can be moderated by factors

related to perceptions of the social context, self, others, and the need (e.g. social norm, personal mastery goal, interpersonal judgment and fairness, and expedient need).

An understanding of help-seeking behavior will contribute to a general theory of goal seeking and completion. Drawing on goal systems approaches that synthesize how means and goals work together in activating each other, the present paper focuses on help seeking as a viable means to attain goals (Kruglanski and Kopetz 2009; Oettingen et al. 2010). The decision to ask for help also involves satisfying or compromising multiple goals (related to one's identity, maintenance of perceptions by others, and use of shared resources), which consumers take into account as they weigh the costs and benefits of seeking help (Laren and Janiszewski 2009; Fishbach and Dhar 2005; Hofmann, Lei, and Grant 2009).

Understanding the consumer help-seeking process has further implications for research related to self-evaluation, social perception, and equity theories. Helping relations are inherently unequal relations, because the seeker is asking the potential giver to extend resources that the seeker could not get for himself or herself, putting the seeker in an inferior position to the giver (Nadler 2002). Consumers may feel a threat to their self-esteem and self-efficacy during this process (Fisher et al. 1982), which may negatively affect their judgment of the help provider (Algoe and Stanton 2010; Mathews and Green 2010). However, when consumers feel that the help giver thoughtfully considered the well-being of the seeker, they are likely to feel grateful and form strong relationship with the giver (Algoe, Haidt, and Gable 2008).

The main purpose of the present article is to provide a useful framework regarding when and how help-seeking could be encouraged. By understanding how characteristics of the context, giver, seeker, and the needed help, both consumers and marketers can make informed decisions as they consider different avenues to seek and provide help. This allows consumers to devise strategies for seeking help while protecting their other conflicting needs, such as need for autonomy and competence (DePaulo 1983). Marketers can also develop ways to assist consumers in recognizing the problem and make effective help available from the corporation.

Avenues for Future Research

The present research focused on the general help-seeking decision process, but future studies could investigate how different types of needs (e.g. food, money, time, or information) affect consumers' help-seeking behaviors. Research has shown that asking for time donation (vs. monetary donation) makes people think about the exchange as a more emotional consideration rather than a pure economic exchange (Liu and Aaker 2008). Also, the more tangible items, such as food, require transfer of resource from the giver to the seeker. Thus, the tangible item is no longer available to the giver (zero-sum in nature, Crocker and Canevello 2008). Yet, providing informational help does not require the information to be taken away from the giver to the seeker, but the information is simply shared. Thus, when considering costs and benefits of seeking help, the factors that consumers take into account may differ depending on the kinds of needs that they are asking for.

Future research could also investigate how utilization of online platforms, including social media and smartphone apps, influences consumer help-seeking decisions. Offline help-seeking processes often require face-to-face interactions and investment of time and effort. However, online help-seeking can happen much quicker without having to initiate such involved interaction with the potential help-givers. Moreover, online platforms allow consumers to seek help from multiple or countless potential help-givers. For instance, online product forums allow consumers to ask questions about a product to other consumers around the world. Online apps, such as 6ya.com, allow consumers to instantly connect with repair experts by voice or video on their smartphones to ask questions about products as well as home improvement projects. Such utilization of weak-ties (Granovetter 1973) allow consumers to build interactive networks where individuals conveniently seek and receive help. Doing so also could facilitate creative processes, which enable consumers to freely engage in innovative projects with other consumers and experts (Baer 2010). Consequently, unlike traditional categorization of marketing interactions (i.e. B-to-B, B-to-C, C-to-C), the boundaries between businesses and consumers may become obscure, facilitating the creative process through online help-seeking platforms.

Research investigating factors that cause reluctance in seeking help has focused on the effects of negative emotions, such as anticipated indebtedness and guilt (de Hooge et al. 2014). Yet, specific sets of anticipated positive emotions could facilitate help seeking decisions. Positive emotions are known to motivate people to approach certain targets (Wacker, Heldmann, and Stemmler 2003; Higgins 1997). Also, positive emotion

stimulates optimistic thoughts (Fredrickson 2001). While anticipation of positive emotion could generally make consumers consider the benefits of seeking help, specific emotions may be especially effective in facilitating help-seeking behaviors, such as gratitude and hope. While a variety of life experiences can elicit feelings of gratitude, it is likely to be experienced when individuals attribute personal benefits, which are not necessarily deserved or earned, as a result of the good intentions of another person (Emmons and McCullough 2004). Gratitude stems from intentional benefits received from another person without expected return of favor (Watkins, et al. 2006). Thus, by assuming the potential givers' good and altruistic intentions, anticipation of gratitude is likely to enable consumers to seek help. Feelings of hope could also increase help-seeking behaviors. A unique characteristic of hope is that it facilitates future-oriented behaviors (Winterich and Haws 2011). Feelings of hope trigger positive expectation regarding future outcomes, which allow consumers to take more risks and exert self-control to achieve better outcomes (MacInnis and de Mello 2005). By focusing on the attainable goals in the future, anticipated feelings of hope could facilitate help-seeking behaviors.

The present article focused on factors that an individual takes into account when seeking help for one's own needs. Yet, consumers could also seek help for a group where he or she belongs, such as family, sports team, military crew, or organizational team where he or she belongs. In such cases, an individual's intention to seek help may differ from a group's intention to do so. Prior research suggests that personal intention differs from group intentions. Shared intention (Bratman 1993) or we-intentions (Tuomela 1995) refers to "a commitment of an individual to participate in joint action and involves an

implicit or explicit agreement between the participants to engage in that joint action.” People often use social notions of intentions, such as “our intention to see a movie together” or “the team’s plan to implement a new offensive basketball strategy,” which emphasize social nature (Bagozzi and Lee 2002). Likewise, consumers’ intention to seek help on behalf of, or as a part of, a group could spark a sense of social identity (Turner and Reynolds 2010), causing their help-seeking process to differ from an individual help-seeking described in this article.

Future research could also investigate how help-givers could frame help-seeking behaviors to empower those who are in need. For example, during her interaction with a civilian in Iraq, UNHCR endorser Angelina Jolie said, “you need help not because you are poor, but because you are the future of Iraq” (Etefa 2009). Likewise, communicating the giver’s faith in the seeker’s potential, and the impact that the needy person could make to others and the society, could make individuals become more willing to seek and receive help. Individuals feel grateful when someone else recognizes their value (Algoe, Haidt, and Gable 2008). They also feel empowered and happy when they perceive that they are making a positive impact on others’ lives (Dunn, Aknin, and Norton 2014). By emphasizing the seeker’s future capable self, the givers could positively frame their needed state to facilitate help-seeking behaviors.

Intervention Approach to Studying Consumer Help-Seeking Behavior

With accurate identification of the specific personal and social judgment that hinders consumers’ help-seeking decisions, marketers can devise effective interventions to mitigate that barrier and facilitate help-seeking decisions. With this knowledge,

marketers could enrich help-platforms in ways consumers would truly appreciate while facilitating consumers' lasting relationships with each other and with the firm. Thus, this discussion concludes by introducing ways for marketers to design interventions that lift the barriers that hinder consumer help-seeking behavior. The following section discusses the definition, theoretical foundation, key considerations, and types of psychological interventions.

The primary purpose of intervention is to introduce a variable that can alter a result or course of events for better outcomes. The term “intervention” has been used widely across fields to indicate orientation toward an individual and a society's well-being – the economic status in economics and public policy, mental health of patients in clinical psychology, academic achievements in education, and consumer welfare in marketing. Marketing researchers recognize the need for advances in knowledge aimed at helping consumers make wiser decisions that not only benefit themselves but also others in the society (Bazerman 2001; Gershoff and Irwin 2012). In this effort, marketing researchers have devised interventions that help consumers to make environmental-friendly decisions, healthy food choices, and help-giving decisions (Berger and Rand 2008; Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh 2010; Luchs, Naylor, Irwin, and Raghunathan 2010; Schultz et al. 2007; Zhou et al. 2011). Future research could explore how different interventions can be used to promote consumer help-seeking behaviors so that marketers can better assist consumers in using the product to its fullest potential.

Intervention researchers investigate how much people on average benefit from a given intervention rather than providing detailed insights as to whether or not a specific

intervention is likely to work for a given person. To understand how and why a given intervention influences an individual, a researcher must take into account the influence of individual characteristics, contextual variables, and cultural values on intervention outcomes (Lyubomirsky and Layous 2013). By considering the person-intervention fit, marketers can design a suitable intervention for the specific target population to facilitate help-seeking decisions.

When investigating consumer help-seeking behavior, marketers need to recognize that the subtle features of a situation or context can influence behavior (Lewin 1951; Ross and Nisbett 1991). For instance, even when the help center has a banner that says “Please ask all of your questions – We love our customers,” consumers may feel reluctant to ask their questions if they perceive a certain standard of questions that seem appropriate to ask. That is, if other consumers come to the help center with advanced-level questions about computers, then consumers may feel reluctant to ask novice questions.

Alternatively, if other consumers who are seeking help seem to be significantly incapable, then consumers may feel reluctant to seek help as it may dissociate themselves from those incapable individuals. Likewise, the presence of implicit norms can influence consumer help-seeking behaviors, even when there are no explicit rules in the environment (Karabenick and Sharma 1994; Ryan, Pintrich, and Midgley 2001).

Marketers would need to consider such subtle features of a situation that can hinder or facilitate consumer help-seeking behaviors.

A consumer’s subjective interpretation of the situation influences help-seeking behaviors. That is, consumers might construct their versions of perceived reality which

could be completely irrelevant from the reality. For instance, consumers who realize their need for help could interpret their situation as a sign that they are incompetent, they need to make more effort, or that the task is very difficult. Depending on which interpretation they come up with, the consumers' courses of action in seeking help could widely differ. Even when consumers are receiving help, they could interpret their experience as a sign that the help-giver cares, feels obligated, or wants to show off his or her talents. Again, the consumers' appreciation of received help will depend on which interpretation they set their mind to. Being sensitive to consumers' subjective interpretations of the help-seeking episode will allow marketers to understand how to modify a specific interpretation to change behavior.

Marketers need to thoroughly understand the existing tension system in consumer help-seeking behaviors. Tension systems refer to forces that facilitate a behavior and the opposing forces that hinder the same behavior. Behaviors can be modified by adding forces in the desired direction or by diminishing opposing forces (Lewin 1958). Thus, with comprehensive understanding of this tension system, marketers can modify consumers' behaviors by removing barriers that prevent the help-seeking behaviors or by adding new meaning into the behavior to promote the behaviors. Multiple factors are likely to influence consumers' help-seeking behaviors, so isolating the most prevalent factor may take time and multiple iterations of trial and error during the intervention research and development process. When marketers successfully isolate the core factor that influences consumer help-seeking behavior in a specific context, then even very small manipulations can change the systems of behavior "by redirection rather than by

brute force (p. 20; Ross and Nisbett 1991).” Successful redirection of thinking in the short term can not only change the present behavior but sustain effects over time (Cohen et al., 2009; Sherman et al., 2013; Yeager and Walton 2011). Thus, making significant effort in the research and development of intervention can actually save an immense amount of cost for the firm.

Essay 2

Overcoming Consumers' Reluctance to Seek Help in Online Product Forums

Abstract

The present research examines factors that consumers take into consideration when they seek assistance through public help platforms. In particular, I focus on online forums aimed at general use of a product or troubleshooting a problem. While researchers have examined factors that influence help-giving decisions, very little research examines the factors that influence consumers' decisions to request help in these environments. In eight studies, I show that consumers consider the standard set by peer consumers who are also seeking help using a particular platform. As a result, consumers are reluctant to post questions that seem to fall short of the peer expectations due to anticipated embarrassment, stemming from concerns about others' negative judgments. However, as I show, marketers can mitigate consumers' perceived judgments from others if marketers provide an opportunity for consumers to publicly self-assess their question level before posting questions. Thus, I introduce a novel tool, called a public self-assessment, that marketers can implement in online product forums to facilitate consumers' help-seeking behaviors. Therefore, this research provides concrete solutions for marketers and customers to overcome reluctance in seeking help in online product forums, by bringing together the literature on help-seeking behaviors, self-presentation, and social and emotional influences.

Keywords: Consumer help-seeking; Online forum; Social influence; Peer social norm;

Disclaimers; Public help-seeking

INTRODUCTION

Consumers often encounter difficulty when using products. For instance, they may not understand how to use some features, or they may not be able to troubleshoot or perform repairs when there is a malfunction (Stanley 1997). To resolve these difficulties, consumers often require help from the firm or from others. But to receive help, a consumer must be willing to request it. If for some reason they are reluctant to ask, they may suffer prolonged frustration and may become dissatisfied with a product or brand. On the other hand, if they receive help, problem resolution may lead to more utility from the product, positive evaluations of the brand, and positive word-of-mouth. Thus, it is important for both consumers and for firms that consumers choose to seek help and receive it when needed.

Marketers now offer a variety of online services and platforms dedicated to providing assistance, finding solutions, exchanging best practices, and building expertise while forging social relationships (Mathwick, Wiertz, and de Ruyter 2008; Rainie and Horrigan 2005; Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009). Consumers increasingly turn to these online sources to troubleshoot issues on their own before going to repair centers (Galvin 2016; Wenzel 2007). For example, more than 40% of consumers turn to online communities for help when they have difficulty with technology products (Maoz 2012; Sussin 2012).

Although some of these sites provide searchable frequently asked questions, for many problems, consumers must be willing to publicly post a request for help. But will they? Imagine a consumer who is having trouble with the audio on his new computer,

which he considers a relatively basic level problem. When he goes to an online product forum to request assistance, he finds that nearly every other request for help has been about a relatively advanced level problem. Does he ask his question, or does he think twice about posting?

Purpose and Contribution of Current Inquiry

The purpose of this paper is to explore how other participants in online help forums can influence help seeking behavior. Drawing on literature from equity (Greenberg and Westcott 1983; Huseman, Hatfield, and Miles 1987), social influence (Bagozzi and Lee 2002; Dahl, Manchanda, and Argo 2001; Deutsch and Gerard 1955), and self-image theories (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Steele 1988), I argue that the questions that other consumers have previously posted can lead to the perception of a norm about the degree of question difficulty that is appropriate for the forum. Next, consumers' concerns about negative judgments from violating the norm can diminish their likelihood of asking for help. Further, I show that facilitating a public self-assessment of one's own questions can serve to diminish the negative effects of peer norm violation and increase help-seeking behaviors.

Prior work in marketing about online forums has primarily studied either the nature of the forum or what attracts consumers to use and participate in them. For instance, researchers have investigated the structural organization of online forum communities (Armstrong and Hagel 1996; Teichmann, Stokburger-Sauer, Plank, and Strobl 2015), the influence of online communities on new product development (Gruner,

Homburg, and Lukas 2014), consumers' motivation for forming and participating in online communities (Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo 2004; Nov, Naaman, and Ye 2010; Nambisan and Baron 2007), and the impact of online forums on consumers' consideration set formation process (Adjei, Nobel, and Noble 2010; Chen and Xie 2008; Moe and Trusov 2011). Although researchers have examined factors that influence help-giving decisions (Bendapudi, Singh, and Bendapudi 1996), such as how consumers provide helpful information for others by posting opinions, preferences, reviews, and solutions (Schlosser 2005; Thompson, Kim, and Smith 2016), very little research examines the factors that influence consumers' decisions to request help in these environments.

The current inquiry is important because the likelihood of receiving accurate and useful answers often depends on the expertise of potential help-givers (Bickart and Schindler 2001; Chalmers Thomas, Price, and Schau 2013; Mathwick et al. 2008). When consumers recognize a firm's sincere efforts to meet their needs, they reward the firm by increasing their purchases and strengthening their brand loyalty (Morales 2005; Palmatier, Jarvis, Bechkoff, and Kardes 2009; Wetzel, Hammerschmidt, and Zablah 2013). One might infer, therefore, that all consumers would prefer a forum that has demonstrated it can answer questions posed by advanced level users. Paradoxically, this environment where consumers are most likely to receive accurate answers may hinder consumers' willingness to ask for help in the first place to protect their sense of competence and autonomy. When consumers perceive that help-seeking threatens their self-integrity, they judge the help-giver negatively even if they receive a proper solution

to their needs (Algoe and Stanton 2010). Thus, I investigate social and emotional barriers that consumers face when seeking help via public platforms, as well as ways to mitigate those barriers to facilitate help-seeking behaviors.

The article is organized as follows. I begin with an overview of the help-seeking decision process. I draw on empirical research from economics (e.g., equity theory), sociology (e.g., social influence theory), and psychology (e.g., threat to self-image) to identify factors that affect help-seeking behaviors. Then, I focus on the social norms consumers infer from the questions asked by others and examine how these inferences influence consumers' decisions to seek help on public platforms. Finally, I explore how consumers' public acknowledgement of their own level of knowledge prior to asking for help can mitigate help-avoidance behaviors. In support of this argument, I present eight empirical studies in which participants must consider asking for help in online forums. Study 1 provides initial evidence of people's reluctance to ask for help when they believe their own questions are easy, but others questions are more sophisticated. Study 2 shows that anticipated embarrassment mediates the results. Studies 3 and 4 offer support for the concern about norms by showing that when given the opportunity to pre-warn about a competence-norm violation, the effect is diminished. Study 5, 6, and 7 examine how other factors (self-affirmation, communal norms, and incentive mechanisms) associated with increased likelihood of asking for help are less likely to be effective when competence-norm violations are of concern. The last study, study 8, further offers support for this by showing that each factor targets specific concern, which decides its effectiveness in facilitating consumers' help-seeking decisions. The effects hold across a

number of product categories (electronics and creative skills). Also, the effects hold across both scenarios in which participants describe actual problems they are having with real products, and lab studies in which participants must require help following assembly instructions. Finally, I offer a discussion that describes theoretical as well as managerial contributions and of this research, and avenues for future work.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The Model of Help-Seeking Decisions

Help-seeking refers to the act of asking others for assistance, information, advice, or support (Lee 1997). Although receiving help may benefit an individual, help-seeking also has significant costs associated with it. In addition to exerting the effort and time to locate a potential help provider, help seekers also risk being judged negatively by others. When a person seeks help, he or she is asking the potential help-givers to exert their time, effort, and resources to provide assistance (DePaulo 1983). Thus, help-seeking decisions assume an unequal-status relationship between the help-seeker and the help-giver. The seeker must reveal his or her relative incompetence and dependence (Druian and DePaulo 1977; Karabenick and Knapp 1988), which can cause others to negatively judge the seeker's ability (Ashford, Blatt, and Van de Walle 2003; Grant and Ashford 2008). Because people are highly motivated to avoid potential threats to their self-image (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Consedine et al. 2007; Tracy and Robins 2007), the potential social cost of seeking help may lead people to avoid doing so (Morrison and Vancouver 2000; Ryan, Hicks, and Midgley 1997; Williams and Williams 1983).

Broadly speaking, four factors moderate consumers' willingness to ask for help: the characteristics of the help-giver, the help-seeker, the task, and finally, the context in which the help is needed. First, prior work on the characteristics of help-givers has shown that increased trust, expertise, and accessibility of help-givers increase the likelihood that the seeker will ask for help (Hofmann, Lei, and Grant 2009). In addition, people are more likely to seek help from similar-status peers as compared to higher-status supervisors or lower-status subordinates (Blau 1955). Second, research on the characteristics of help-seekers found that individuals who possess interdependent construals are more willing to depend on others when seeking help than those with independent construals (Komissarouk and Nadler 2014). Compared to individuals who have higher motivation and ability in a given task, those who have lower motivation and ability feel more threatened by obstacles and difficulties. This leads them to not only avoid seeking help, but also to conceal their difficulties (Dweck 1986; Marchand and Skinner 2007). Third, research has found that task characteristics influence help-seeking decisions. When the task must be solved immediately, such expediency drives people to seek help as soon as possible, as much as possible (Butler 1998). However, when the task is highly relevant to an area central to their self-esteem, individuals are less likely to seek help, because it becomes that much greater a threat to the self (Nadler 1987).

Lastly, previous research found that the help-seeking context matters. For example, people are more reluctant to seek help in public contexts than in private ones (Shapiro 1983). Importantly, in public, perceived social norms have a significant influence on help-seeking decisions and often override other influences (Deutsch and

Gerard 1955). Social norms are rules that guide behaviors in public settings, including expected actions, speech, use of language, and prohibited behaviors (Brennan, Eriksson, Goodwin, and Southwood 2013). In public settings, people observe others' behaviors in that environment to understand how they are expected to behave. One of the key functions of a social norm is that it makes people accountable to one another so far as complying with others' expectations and behaviors (Brennan et al. 2013). Thus, when people engage in behaviors that are not consistent with a norm or standards of public behavior, they may become subject to harsh judgment, and sometimes punishment such as public scolding, removal of privileges, and exclusion or ostracism (Keltner and Anderson 2000). Violating social norms can hold such adverse consequences that people will often abide by the norm even if it means forgoing personal values and benefits (Asch 1951; Sherif 1936). Since the present research focuses on such influence of social norms on consumer help-seeking decisions, I further expand on different types of social norms below.

Types of Social Norms

Four distinct social norms influence help-seeking decisions: autonomy, equity, relational, and competence norms. Autonomy norms refer to the extent an individual is expected to carry out the task on his or her own. For instance, on airplanes, it is a norm that consumers put their own luggage in overhead bins and buckle their own seat belts. Certain social groups sometimes employ a stronger autonomy norm than others. For

example, in many cultures, males are expected to do things on their own more than females, so men are less likely to ask for help (Addis and Mahalik 2003).

Equity norms refer to the extent an individual is expected to behave in a fair manner. In help-seeking contexts, the fairness calculation takes into account not only the fairness of the exchange between a help-seeker and a help-giver, but also how others may view the exchange (Brickman, Kidder, Coates, Rabinowitz, Cohn, and Karuza 1983). So even if a person has a good reason to seek help from a potential help-giver, if he or she is taking a disproportionately large amount of time or resources when others are waiting or in need, then the help-seeking episode may be judged as unfair.

Relational norms refer to the type of relationship that a help-seeker has with a help-giver. For instance, relational norms for strangers involve expectations of privacy and autonomy, and very limited expectations of communication or sharing of resources. So help-seeking from a stranger tends to be limited to minor requests for resources, effort, or time, such as providing directions, or holding an elevator. Professional, or transactional relationships, such as when someone is paid for providing help, involve a different set of norms, where expectations allow for requesting more significant time, effort, or resources (Clark and Mills 1993; Marcoux 2009). Closer relationships, such as family membership involve expectations of shared resources, and reciprocity that may be delivered over a longer period of time. This also legitimizes seeking a greater amount of help (Brinberg and Wood 1983; Foa and Foa 1974).

Most important to the present discussion is the norm of competence. Competence norms refer to the extent an individual is expected to have particular skills or abilities that

he or she can apply to solving task-related problems. For example, in developed countries, most people are expected to know how read and follow basic instructions, how to use a stove to heat food, or how to select and purchase items in grocery stores. Depending on the situation, these norms can be different, so people requesting to rent a car are expected to know how to drive a car, and students in advanced business school courses are expected to have at least a basic level of ability to use spreadsheets to work with data.

Competence is particularly important to personal self-esteem in social settings, because people perceive a competent individual as the one who is capable, effective, and in control (Tafarodi and Swann 1995; Rucker, Hu, and Galinsky 2014). People also strive to identify with the group that shows good performance or high status in competence-related domains (Bettencourt, Charlton, Door, and Hume 2001; Crocker, Blaine, and Luhtanen 1993). Yet, when an individual asks a question about a given domain, he or she reveals a limit to knowledge or ability. So his or her competence becomes readily apparent through the content of the request (Otero and Graesser 2001). Since consumers' lack of knowledge is a salient characteristic of their questions when seeking product help, the norm of competence is likely to be a significant concern for consumers, particularly in public settings, such as online product forums.

I propose that concern for competence norm will play a significant role in online product forum interactions. Compared to face-to-face settings, interactions via online product forums often reveal less personal information. Most online forums are anonymous, making the interaction less personally involving than face-to-face

interactions. Even so, I posit that consumers will be cognizant of the competence norm present in the online forum and strive to meet the standard of the forum. The concern for competence norm would be even more pronounced in face-to-face settings, which makes the current investigation in online product forum all the more interesting, because the present study will provide a conservative test for my predictions.

These four types of norms could manifest themselves as injunctive or descriptive norms, the two types of norms overarching the four norms discussed above. Injunctive norms are people's perceptions of what behaviors are approved of or disapproved of by others, while descriptive norms are people's perceptions of how people actually behave (Aronson, Wilson, Akert 2010; Cialdini et al., 1990). Research has shown that descriptive norm works better in influencing behavior than injunctive norms (Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius 2008). The main interest of this paper is examining the influence of descriptive norm on consumer help-seeking decisions. I propose that in response to concerns about violations of these norms, consumers' willingness to seek help will be influenced by others' requests for help.

Inferred Social Norms in Help-Seeking Forums

Although in many cases, norms are well established and likely to be known by most individuals either due to prior experience, or because the norms are explicitly stated. For instance, museums often post signs that tell people not to touch artwork, and hospitals often post signs to inform about norms for handwashing. However, most norms tend to be inferred from observing others' behavior (Brennan et al. 2013). In the context

of public help forums many norms or rules, such as not using vulgar language or not selling products or services, are explicitly stated, but norms of competence are rarely stated, leaving consumers to infer what they are expected to know, or how they should behave, based on their own prior experience, or by observation.

Despite its grounding in a well-established social influence paradigm, the marketing literature has paid relatively little attention to the norms and expectations of peer help-seekers. Yet, when consumers seek help in public settings, they run the risk of violating norms, and of judgment from others who are present (Dahl, Manchanda, and Argo 2001). Research in other areas supports this. For example, norms held by peers at a workplace have been shown to influence an individual's decisions relevant to those norms, such as how many vacation days to ask for (Bamberger and Biron 2007). Similarly, in educational settings, individuals have been shown to be more likely to seek help when their peers also do so (Dweck 1986; Tessler and Schwartz 1972). Thus, norms and expectations of peer help-seekers are likely to play a significant role in consumers' decisions to seek help using a particular public help platform.

One factor that may lead people to infer norms in public help forums, is the type of questions that have already been posed by other consumers. In most online forums, consumers may readily view the details of others' questions which can vary widely despite referring to the same product. So the topics of questions asked, and importantly, the degree of sophistication of those questions, may differ depending on the forum. For example, on some online forums about computers, others' questions may largely be quite basic, such as how to alter the volume on the internal speakers, or how to print

photographs. Others' questions on other forums may be more sophisticated, such as how to alter operating system code or how to set up networks. Previous studies have examined contexts where individuals are seeking the same type of help as peers (e.g. asking questions about the same math problems given by an instructor; Tessler and Schwartz 1972), but to date, no studies have examined how the degree of sophistication of others' questions influences an individual's willingness to ask for help. Here, I posit that consumers make inferences about competence norms by observing the sophistication of questions asked by other consumers who have also asked for help. Thus, peer help-seekers' questions can influence the perceived competence norm of the forum, which consumers take into account when deciding to ask for help on that forum.

Negative Judgment of Peer Help-Seeking Consumers

In many online forums, consumers gather with a shared commitment and passion for specific products or brands, which has the potential to produce feelings of kinship and harmony (Chalmers Thomas et al. 2013; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Yet, due to the anonymous and impersonal nature of online forum interactions, these communities sometimes become the stage for indiscretion and defamation (Berry 2006; Hinds and Bailey 2003; Husemann, Ladstaetter, and Luedicke 2015). If a consumer's request for help suggests a level of competence that differs from the norm of the forum, that consumer may be perceived as having violated a norm of the forum. In turn, those individuals may be met with negative judgment and potential public retaliation, shaming

or embarrassment by others who participate in the forum. Being aware of this possibility, a consumer may be reluctant to ask for help.

Such anticipated negative judgment from norm violation will be most likely when the question that consumers have falls short of the standard set by peer consumers. When asking help on online forums, consumers must reveal the details of the issue at hand to get the most helpful answers. Because of this, consumers must expose their knowledge level regarding the issue. In general, a request for help may be defined as “a low competence request” if it involves a request for information that is associated with basic function of a product, a question that is typically asked by novices (i.e. those with little expertise), or whose answers are likely to be known by most others in the setting. Since most online forums are completely transparent and open to public, consumers can also readily view the details of others’ questions. During this process, the present research demonstrates that they will perceive a social norm present on these forums, and be reluctant to post a question that does not meet the perceived expectation of that norm. Thus, I posit that such reluctance will be heightened when a consumer believes that the level of the level of sophistication of his or her question is more basic than the questions that others have asked on the forum. Consequently, these consumers are likely to anticipate feelings of embarrassment resulting from the concern for others’ negative judgments (Keltner and Buswell 1997; Lee 1997).

H1: When consumers perceive that the question they have is more basic compared to other questions asked on the public help platform, they will be less likely to ask their question.

H2: Consumers' anticipated embarrassment stemming from concern for others' negative judgment will mediate this effect.

Factors that Mitigate Negative Social Judgment

Public Self-Assessment

Symbolic interactionist theory suggests that as individuals create meaning for situations, others, and themselves, they both interpret and define others' actions, and they also actively manage and transform how their own actions are to be interpreted by others (Charon 2004; Blumer 1969). If consumers' reluctance to ask for help is due to concern about embarrassment and negative judgment from others stemming from the perception that a norm has been violated, then preventing the formation of such negative judgment should increase willingness to ask for help. One way this may come about is if the help seeker can actively manage the inferred meaning of his or her violation of a norm when seeking help (Lewin 1958; Ross and Nisbett 2011).

When people perceive that their actions may be outside of expectations or otherwise threaten the shared meaning of the situation, they often employ specific strategies that signal to others how their actions should be interpreted, with the intent of signaling the ongoing shared meaning of the situation (McHugh 1968; Mills 1940; Schutz 1964). This active management includes "face work," or specific actions that are performed to indicate, or maintain others' beliefs that an actor is behaving in a way that is consistent with expectations (Goffman 1967). An important goal of face work is avoiding or correcting a loss of face and the embarrassment it produces (Goffman 1955; Leary and

Kowalski 1990; Schlenker 1980). For example, a person who must commit an act that may be judged negatively, such as leaving an event early, may offer an explanation prior to doing so, and in this way avoid seeming rude when he or she leaves (Goffman 1967).

One particularly relevant strategy to the work here is the use of a disclaimer. Disclaimers are statements that disclose information to pre-warn others; disclaimers seek to define forthcoming conduct as not relevant to the kind of negative judgment that others may hold (Hewitt and Stokes 1975). Individuals display in their speech the expectation of possible responses of others to their impending conduct. By doing so, the user is acknowledging awareness of his or her behavior as a potential violation of a norm, with the aim of diminishing the social cost of the infraction (Cheng and Ching 2016; Hewitt and Stokes 1975). For instance, if an individual is concerned about making a statement that violates expectations, he or she might qualify this by first saying “I know this sounds stupid, but...”; “I’m no expert, of course, but...”; or “I really haven’t thought through this very well, but...” Thus, disclaimers allow people to manage their self-presentations in social interactions by explicitly indicating awareness that a statement violates a norm. This serves to dissociate one’s identity from the statement’s specific content (Goodman 2014; Stapleton 2015).

Since explicitly stated knowledge of violations of norms can be used to mitigate negative consequences in conversations with others, the same may be true in help-seeking contexts. I propose that *public self-assessment* of the level of sophistication of one’s own question will mitigate concerns about falling short of the competence expectations of others when asking for product help in public. That is, if in asking for

help, consumers publicly acknowledge that their request is associated with a low degree of competence, their concern for violating the forum's norms will be mitigated, and they will be more willing to ask for help.

People strive to portray accurate self-assessments when their actual ability is easily recognizable to observers in public settings (Aronson and Mettee 1968; Baumeister and Jones 1978). By publicly acknowledging that they are asking a basic level question, a consumer can manage expectations and minimize accountability, so that others will not be taken off guard by its absence (McLuhan, Pawluch, Shaffir, and Haas 2014). Doing so can also communicate an awareness of one's own limitations or ignorance, which is associated with one's sense of humility. Humble individuals display a transparent disclosure of personal limits (Davis et al., 2011). A humble person who is able to be vulnerable is often trusted by others, which promotes cooperative behaviors (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995).

Public self-assessment also communicates the consumer's awareness of others' possible responses to his or her question (i.e. "why are you asking such a novice question here?"). When a person engages in an act while demonstrating knowledge of the likely reactions of others, it reduces the possibility that he or she will be perceived as having acted in ignorance (Brennan et al. 2013). So when a help-seeker pre-acknowledges that he or she is aware that the question may be inconsistent with the norms of the forum, others no longer need to evaluate it and instead will focus on the central content of the question (Chaiken and Trope 1999; Duckworth, Bargh, Garcia, and Chaiken 2002; Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Thus, a consumer can use public self-assessment to communicate

his or her identity as a responsible actor in the forum. Consequently, I show that public acknowledgement of one's own question level can facilitate help-seeking behavior by lifting concern for others' negative judgment.

H3: When consumers publicly acknowledge their question is basic, they will become more willing to ask their relatively basic question in a forum where others have asked more sophisticated questions.

H4: By publicly acknowledging their level of question, consumers will perceive that others will note their awareness of the norm and their question level, which will mediate the above effect.

Public Self-Affirmation

A second factor that may influence willingness to ask for help in public forums is one's belief that others know they are competent in other areas. People have a strong need to maintain self-integrity as competent, good, coherent, stable, and capable of free choice and of control over important outcomes (Aronson et al., 1999; Steele 1988). Yet, real and perceived failures to meet culturally or socially significant standards can cause threats to self-integrity (Leary and Baumeister 2000).

By affirming an alternative source of self-integrity, consumers may fulfill the need to protect the self in the face of threat. Self-affirmation theory states that people can respond to a self-image threat by recruiting other resources to maintain an overall positive self-image (Steele 1988). Such self-affirmations include "reflecting on important aspects of one's life irrelevant to the threat, or engaging in an activity that makes salient

important values unconnected to the threatening event” (p.186, Sherman and Cohen 2006). Research finds that when another person has unfavorable information about an individual, the individual compensates by enhancing his or her self-descriptions on traits about which the target person did not have prior information (Baumeister and Jones 1978). Along the same vein, people inherently believe that they can ameliorate the impact of a self-image threat by affirming other aspects of the self (Steele and Liu 1983). When focusing on domains of self-integrity unrelated to the threat, people realize that their self-worth does not hinge on the evaluative implications of the immediate situation. This enables individuals to deal with threatening events and information without running away or hurting.

If violations of norms that lead to negative judgments of one competence diminish the likelihood of asking for help when others’ questions are more sophisticated, then public affirmation of an alternative source of self-integrity, such as their competence in domains unrelated to the one where they are seeking help, may attenuate this. Doing so would affirm his or her global perceptions of self-integrity. Thus, otherwise threatening events or information would lose their self-threatening capacity (Silverman, Logel, and Cohen 2013). For instance, when needing to ask a question about computers, a consumer could publicly share his or her achievements in international rhetoric competitions. Then he or she may not feel as concerned about potential negative judgment and be more willing to ask for assistance. That is, self-affirmed consumers would be less concerned about potential judgments of others and overcome their reluctance in asking novice questions amongst the more advanced ones.

H5: When consumers are given an opportunity to publicly affirm their competence in a domain unrelated to the one they need help with, they will become more willing to ask their relatively basic question on the forum where others have asked more sophisticated questions.

H6: By letting others know about their personal competence in another domain, consumers will perceive that others will not judge them as incompetent in seeking help, which will mediate the above effect.

Communal Norm

In addition to norms about participants' competence in the forum domain, consumers may also rely on other norms they perceive in the forum in deciding whether or not to request help. For example, although some social exchange environments value the independence of participants, others may hold a norm of communal orientation. A communal orientation is characterized by unconditional emotional engagement with the needs and interests of others, even in response to strangers (Clark and Mills 1993). Communal norms foster communal self-concept, defined as interdependence and connection to others, such as family members, friends, important social groups, and communities (Markus and Kitayama 2003; 2010). Accordingly, communal relationships established through norms emphasize behaviors that increase interdependence (Johnson and Grimm 2010). A communal norm enforced by the online product community will likely set a tone for interdependent relationships, where individuals give relationship benefits to others unconditionally and are more concerned with need than equality (Beck

and Clark 2010; Clark 1984; Fiske 1992). So, in such a forum, one would expect individuals to be more open to offering assistance, to expect that one might have repeated interactions with the same others, and to be supportive of others.

If consumers are reluctant to ask basic questions due to anticipated embarrassment from falling short of the forum's norms of question difficulty, then they should be more willing to ask the questions if the norm eliminates such expectations. There are two reasons for this. First, the communal norm is likely to prevent other forum participants from negatively judging, or at very least, from initiating any form of punishment against, a person asking a basic level question. So that individual is likely to be less concerned about potential negative judgement and embarrassment.

Second, instead of being considered incompetent, it is possible that those who ask basic questions would be seen as complying with communal norms set by the community. So a consumer is more likely to view his or her request for help as an opportunity to establish cooperative interdependence with others, and as an opportunity to help others who might have similar questions. This benefit of asking for help is expected to diminish embarrassment for asking novice questions, and failing to have similar competence as others on the forum. Thus, asking a novice question becomes a step towards reinforcing communal norm in the forum community and not a demonstration of inability.

I posit that the company setting such a communal norm in the forum and having that norm be followed by its members will effectively promote basic question postings.

H7: Compared to a forum where there is no perceived communal norm, when consumers perceive a communal norm in a forum, they will become more willing to ask a relatively basic question in a forum where others have asked more sophisticated questions.

H8: Compared to a forum where there is no perceived communal norm, when consumers perceive a communal norm in a forum, they will consumers will perceive that others will not judge them as incompetent in seeking help, which will mediate the above effect.

Incentives of Forum Participants

If the reason why consumers do not post basic questions is due to the anticipated judgments of others, then such concern might be eliminated when the potential helpers are given incentives to answer questions. If the forum rewards those who answer questions, then consumers would recognize that potential helpers would view answering questions as an opportunity for rewards, rather than as a basis of judgment for the person who asked the question.

When a person seeks help, he or she is asking someone else to exert time, effort, and resources to provide assistance (DePaulo 1983). As social beings, consumers also take that “imposition” into account and consider whether the cost that others incur is reasonable. In other words, people are concerned about how their actions influence perceptions of fairness in interpersonal dynamics. Equity theories note that consumers have an innate desire to maintain equity in interpersonal relations (Greenberg and

Westcott, 1983). When question askers realize that they receive a more favorable ratio of outcomes to inputs than the person providing help does, the perception of inequity occurs; this results in affective distress, such as feelings of indebtedness or guilt (Walster et al. 1973; Greenberg 1980). People want to restore actual or psychological equity by reciprocating, and they take perceived helper costs into account before asking for help. When reciprocation is not possible, people avoid seeking help (Clark, Gotay, and Mills 1974; DePaulo 1978).

As a communal norm provides an incentive to help those in need in order to benefit the sense of interdependence among participants, other incentives may offer benefits to forum participants that similarly lead them to value an opportunity to help others. As noted above, when an individual receives a benefit for offering assistance, such as when someone is a paid agent, norms typically allow for requesting more significant time, effort, or resources (Clark and Mills 1993; Marcoux 2009).

Incentives to offer assistance need not necessarily be monetary. For example, work in online reviewing and posting behavior suggests that a primary reason for doing so is that individuals perceive value in being able to demonstrate their own knowledge or abilities to others (Barasch and Berger 2013; Berger 2014; De Angelis et al. 2012; Packard and Wooten 2013). Additionally, many online forums have explicit mechanisms where participants' posts can be rated by others as to the helpfulness of the review. For example, Amazon.com allows consumers to click yes or no to the question "Was this review helpful to you?" Similarly, Amazon's online discussion forums asks whether each post "adds to the discussion" and reports the number of people who said yes and no.

Other online forums offer ranking systems that provide social benefit to those who participate. These ranks often symbolize approximate relative experience, knowledge, and frequency of contribution of members within the community. Members in the online community can give 'kudos' to enhance the reputation of authors of each post (e.g. forums.Lenovo.com), indicate the helpfulness of each post (e.g. developer.Samsung.com), or isolate accepted solutions for other users (e.g. forums.Toshiba.com). By gaining 'kudos', the post authors accumulate points that allow them to rise in rank within the online community. Online forums differ in their algorithms as well as their categories for the rank system. Some online forums rank members numerically from Level 1 ~ Level 10 (discussion.apple.com) while others have more specific titles for ranks, such as Pioneer, Subject Matter Expert, Moderator, or Community Manager (community.usa.Canon.com).

The presence of an incentive mechanism has the potential to increase the likelihood that an individual who is otherwise reluctant to seek help will be more likely to do so. There are two reasons why this is the case. First, the incentives offered to participants diminish the inequity in having to offer time, or other resources to a help seeker. As a result, one seeking help may be less likely to perceive that he or she will be judged negatively, and instead expect that by asking for help, he or she is also offering an opportunity for others to gain by responding. This is expected to reduce concern for embarrassment when one has a question that might violate a norm of the appropriate level of difficulty or sophistication for the forum.

Second, one may perceive that in future he or she may also be able to offer help to others, and thus may also benefit from the incentive system. Indeed prior work has shown that the prospect of providing help to others can alleviate reluctance in seeking help (Alvarez and van Leeuwen 2015). Thus, the explicit presence of an incentive system is likely to make consumers more willing to ask novice questions, despite the presence of other participants' sophisticated questions.

H9: When consumers recognize that the help providers will also receive benefits from answering questions, they will become more willing to ask their relatively basic question on the forum where others have asked more sophisticated questions (study 7).

H10: When each member of the forum are given incentives to answer others' questions, consumers will perceive that others will not judge them as incompetent in seeking help, which will mediate the above effect (study 7).

Overview of the Present Research

I test these hypotheses in eight studies (Figure 2). In study 1, I first measure consumers' willingness to ask their questions depending on the measured difficulty of their own actual questions about computers and the manipulated difficulty of others' questions in an online forum. I find that willingness to ask a question depends on an interaction between the level of difficulty of participant's own questions and the level of difficulty of others' questions. When participants' questions are basic, but others questions are more advanced, there is lower intention to ask for help than when others questions are less advanced, or when participants' themselves have more advanced

questions. I replicate these findings in study 2 using manipulated rather than measured difficulty of a question, and show that anticipated embarrassment mediates the results. In study 3, using an actual problem-solving task in which participants encounter difficulty following a set of assembly instructions, I show that publicly acknowledging one's question as basic increases the likelihood that a consumer will ask his or her relatively novice question on an online forum where other consumers are asking more advanced questions. Study 4 finds that the perceived successful communication of the norm and question level awareness mediates the effect of self-assessment on willingness to ask a basic question in the forum filled with others' advanced questions. In studies 5, 6, and 7, I explore the role of self-affirmation, communal norms, and incentive mechanisms in public forums in influencing willingness to ask questions that violate competence norms. The results of these studies offered no conclusive ability to make statements about the effects of these moderators. Following this, I offer a discussion of why these moderators may not have been as effective as public acknowledgement of one's own question difficulty. Specifically, I suggest that any moderator that influences a willingness to ask for help may only be effective when they directly address the very concern that is diminishing one's willingness to ask. In study 8, I explore this by manipulating both the norm violation (competence vs. fairness) and also manipulating the moderating factor (self-acknowledgement and giver-incentive). Finally, I discuss the implications of my findings and propose future studies to stimulate marketing research on consumers' help-seeking behaviors via online forums.

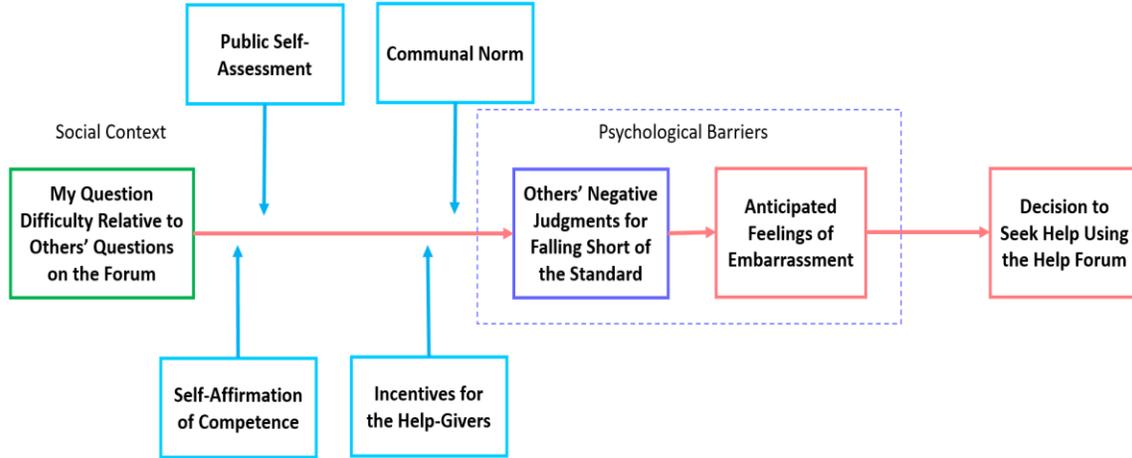


Figure 2. Essay 2 Conceptual Model, Overview of Empirical Studies 1-8.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND FINDINGS

Study 1: Effect of Own and Others' Question Difficulty on Requests for Help

Study 1 tested whether consumers are indeed reluctant to ask a question on an online forum, depending on the level of difficulty their own questions and the difficulty of others questions that are already posted in the forum. This study examines online forums dedicated to computers, a product category familiar to every participant. Significant learning is regularly required for computers, as features and capabilities tend to change frequently. Moreover, a large percentage of the online forums are dedicated to solving computer issues. All participants were asked to generate a question about a problem they had with a computer. They were then directed to an online forum where they could see questions that had previously been posed by other consumers. Depending on condition, other consumers' questions were manipulated to be either fairly basic level questions, or advanced level questions. Participants rated the difficulty level of their own

question and indicated their willingness to ask this question on the forum. It was predicted that willingness to ask for help would depend on an interaction of participants' perceptions of the difficulty of their own questions and the difficulty of the questions posed by others.

Stimuli Development

Prior to the main study sets of basic and advanced and level computer questions were developed in a pretest. Eighty participants recruited through an online pool (Amazon Mturk) were asked to think of instances when they had questions while using a computer. Each was asked to provide three questions; one each that was basic, intermediate, and difficult. This resulted in a set of 240 questions. To these questions, more questions were added that had been gathered from several actual online computer oriented forums, (ex. forums.Lenovo.com and Toshiba.com). From this set, 33 questions judged to vary in terms of difficulty levels were selected for further screening.

Next, 60 new participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 35.27$; female 51.7%) were recruited through an online pool (Amazon Mturk) and each rated the 33 questions according to difficulty level on a 7 point scale. Level 1 was described as indicating basic level questions that someone with a beginner level of computer knowledge would ask; Level 4 indicated intermediate level questions that someone with an average computer knowledge would ask; and Level 7 indicated advanced level questions that someone with near-expert computer knowledge would ask. From these questions, 5 basic ($M = 2.14$) and 5 sophisticated questions ($M = 4.72$) were selected ($t(59) = 15.70, p < .001$).

The five basic questions ($\alpha = .89$) were: 1. “What safety precautions should I follow when using my computer?” 2. “How can I check the warranty status of my machine?” 3. “Where can I find the installation disks for preinstalled software?” 4. “Where can I download drivers and software for my machine?” 5. “How do I stop viruses?” The five sophisticated questions ($\alpha = .91$) were: 1. “How can I restore a failed computer BIOS upgrade after setting up an Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line?” 2. “Where should be the reference noise level at which graphics cards should be tested? 35 dB, 40 dB, 45 dB, 50 dB, or 55 dB?” 3. “I upgraded my drives from EIDE to ATAPI. How do I check the backwards-compatibility of my drives?” 4. “When examining Core i3, i5, i7, Celeron N2807, and AMD APU E-12500 processors, which purpose does each serve the best?” 5. “Which motherboard would be best for multimedia? Can the i7 4790k use 2133 DDR3 ram?”

Method

Forty-three undergraduate students at the University of Texas at Austin were recruited to participate in this study in exchange for extra credit for their introductory marketing course. The study used a two-cell design, with an online forum consisting of either basic or advanced level questions that other consumers have asked, and a continuous measure of the difficulty level of participants’ own questions.

Upon starting the survey, all participants were given a brief description of an online computer troubleshooting forum and were asked to think about a question that they would consider asking on such a forum (see Appendix A for screenshots of the study materials). They were told that their “questions could be viewed and answered by anyone

who visits the forum (i.e. consumers of computer products, visitors browsing the website, and experts working at computer companies).” Participants were then directed to an online forum page that showed five questions asked by others. Depending on the condition, the questions displayed were either easy or difficult. Then, participants rated their own question on a 9 point scale (level 1 = a basic question that requires beginner level computer knowledge, 9 = an advanced question that requires near-expert level knowledge).

Finally, using a 7 point scale, participants indicated how comfortable they would feel asking their question on the online forum page (1 = I am not comfortable at all, 7 = I am very comfortable), as well as how willing they would be to ask their question (1 = I am not willing at all, 7 = I am very willing).

Results

Prior to the analysis, participants’ own rating of their question was mean-centered. The variable for others’ questions was coded as -1 for basic and 1 for advanced. These were used as independent variables in an ANCOVA. The two willingness to ask for help items were averaged to create a single dependent measure ($\alpha = .83$). Results showed a significant main effect of participants’ own level of question difficulty ($F(1, 39) = 4.21, p < .05$), with less discomfort and greater willingness to ask more difficult questions. There was also a main effect of other consumers’ question difficulty level so that participants were less likely to ask for help if others’ questions were difficult ($M = 3.79$) compared to when others’ questions were easy ($M = 5.63$; $F(1, 39) = 27.20, p < .001$) questions were advanced or their own question was basic.

More importantly, the interaction between the difficulty level of others' questions and the participants' own question was significant ($F(1, 39) = 17.89, p = .001$; Figure 3). Follow-up spotlight analysis revealed that when others' questions were advanced, participants with more basic level questions were less willing to ask ($\beta = 1.03, SE = .22, F(1, 39) = 4.91, p = .00$). However, when others on the forum had asked basic level questions, the difficulty of participants' own questions did not lead to a significant difference in their willingness to ask ($\beta = -.36, SE = .23, F(1, 39) = -1.41, p = .16$).

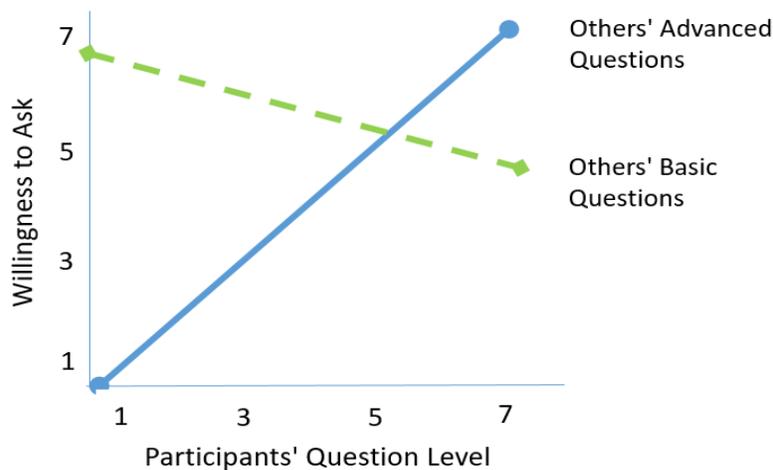


Figure 3. Willingness to Ask, Study 1 – interaction of participants' question level and others' question levels on the online product forum.

Discussion

The findings of this study supported hypothesis 1. When consumers perceive that their own questions are less difficult than the questions that tend to be asked in an online product forum, they are less likely to ask those questions.

In this study, participants generated their own questions and then visited an online product forum, which mimics the situation that consumers will likely face in real life, where they are likely to visit a forum when they are facing a problem, and then must decide whether to request help after seeing others' requests. Yet, the findings of this study do not provide information as to why consumers are less willing to ask their basic level questions when others' questions on the forum were at a more advanced level. Thus, study 2 examines the mechanism underlying the findings of study 1.

Study 2: The Role of Anticipated Embarrassment in Reluctance to Seek Help by Those with Less Advanced Requests

Study 1 demonstrated that consumers are reluctant to ask basic level questions in an online forum where others have asked more sophisticated questions. Study 2 aims to replicate the findings of study 1 while manipulating the difficulty of participants' own questions, rather than measuring it. More importantly, study 2 investigates the mechanism for why consumers are less willing to ask for help. While posting a question may help consumers solve a problem with their product, it also reveals their lack of competence to solve the problem on their own. If they perceive that this is a violation of a competence norm for the forum, they may be concerned about negative judgement and as well as potential feelings of embarrassment (Keltner and Buswell 1997; Lee 1997). Thus, in this study, feelings of anticipated embarrassment are measured and used in a mediation analysis.

Method

Participants recruited through an online pool Mturk ($N = 176$; $M_{\text{age}} = 37.10$; 56.3% female) were randomly assigned to conditions. This study was 2 (Others' Questions on the Online Forum: Basic, Advanced) \times 2 (Own Question: Basic, Advanced) between-subject design. Participants were paid for their participation and were also given a chance to enter a lottery if they answered bonus questions about the content of the instructions and scenarios of the study. This was done to ensure that participants paid full attention throughout the study.

The introduction of the online forum was similar to study 1 with one exception (see Appendix B for screenshots of the study materials). In study 1, participants were told that their questions will be viewed and answered by anyone who visits the forum. In study 2, participants were told that their questions will be viewed by anyone who visits the forum (i.e. consumers of computer products, visitors browsing the website, and experts working at computer companies), but that their questions will be answered by professional computer experts who work at computer companies to make sure that their questions will be properly answered. This was done to control for the perceived likelihood of getting a proper answer for their questions. That is, as noted above, reluctance to ask for help is likely to also be influenced by whether one believes that doing so will lead to a successful resolution of a problem. Having professional experts provide answers diminishes the possibility that participants believe that asking for help in the forum will be fruitless. Yet, this method still allows for examination of the effects of publicly asking for help in the presence of others who may judge the participant.

The manipulations of others' question difficulty levels were the same as study 1, with participants seeing five other consumers' easy or difficult questions, depending on condition. After viewing others' questions on the online forum, participants were presented with a list of five questions in the domain of computers (all different from those asked by other consumers on the forum). Participants selected one of the questions that they did not know the answer to. Depending on condition, the list of questions included either all easy or all difficult questions that had been generated in the pre-test to study 1. This allowed me to manipulate the difficulty of the question that participants' would ask, but also ensure that it was a question to which the participant did not already know the answer. To ensure that the questions were indeed perceived as easy or difficult, participants rated their selected question on a 1 ~ 9 scale (with 1 anchored with "level 1 = a basic question that requires beginner level computer knowledge," and 9 anchored with "level 9 = an advanced question that requires near-expert level computer knowledge").

As in study 1, participants indicated how comfortable they would feel to ask their question on the online forum (1 = I am not comfortable at all, 7 = I am very comfortable), as well as how willing they would be to ask (1 = I am not willing at all, 7 = I am very willing). Lastly, participants indicated their anticipated feelings of embarrassment and shame if they were to ask their question on the forum (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).

Results

Manipulation check. A manipulation check confirmed that participants perceived their questions to be basic or advanced as intended. ANOVA with one's own and others' assigned question levels as independent variables, and participants' perceived question

level as a dependent variable, revealed only a significant main effect of participants' assigned question level on the perceived question level ($F(1, 172) = 515.78, p < .001$), with those in the basic condition rating their question as more basic ($M = 1.89$) than those in the advanced condition ($M = 7.02$). There was no main effect of others' question level ($F(1, 172) = 2.04, NS$) and no significant interaction ($F(1, 172) = 2.03, NS$). Thus, the participants' question level manipulation was successful, and the others' question level did not influence the participants' perception of their own question difficulty.

Willingness to Ask for Help. The two willingness to ask for help items were averaged to form the 'willingness to ask' measure ($\alpha = .88$). ANOVA, with one's own and others' question levels as independent variables and participants' willingness to ask as a dependent variable, revealed no main effects for others' question level ($F(1, 172) = .07, p > .30$) nor participants' own question level ($F(1, 172) = 1.93, p > .10$; see Figure 4). However, there was a significant interaction ($F(1, 172) = 9.00, p < .01$). Follow up spotlight analysis showed that when others are asking basic questions, there is no difference in participants' willingness to ask basic ($M = 3.80$) versus advanced level questions ($M = 4.30, F(1, 172) = -1.13, p = .26$). However, when others have asked advanced level questions, participants were less willing to ask basic questions ($M = 3.28$) compared to more advanced questions ($M = 4.64, F(1, 172) = 3.10, p = .002$).

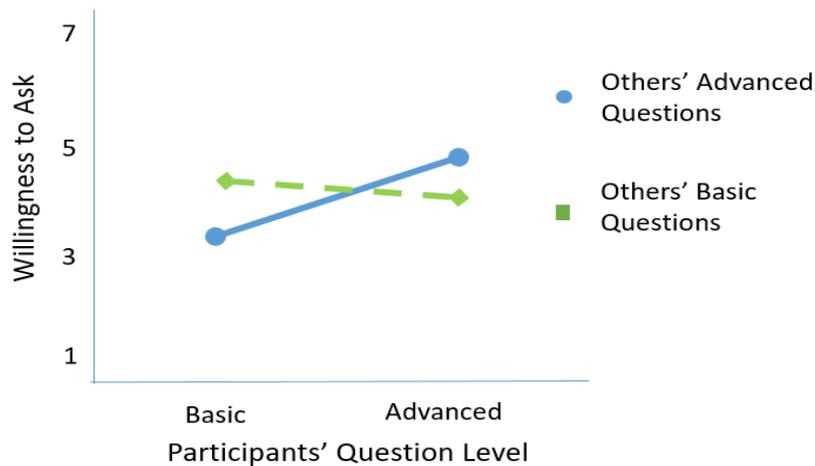


Figure 4. Willingness to Ask, Study 2 – interaction of participants’ question levels and others’ question levels on the online product forum.

Anticipated Embarrassment. To explore the role of anticipated embarrassment on willingness to ask for help, the two embarrassment items were averaged to create a single measure of ‘anticipated embarrassment’ ($\alpha = .89$). ANOVA, with one’s own and others’ question levels as independent variables and participants’ anticipated embarrassment as a dependent variable, revealed no main effects for others’ question level ($F(1, 172) = .51, p = .61$), but did show significant main effect of participants’ own question level ($F(1, 172) = 31.28, p < .01$; see Figure 5). Also, there was a significant interaction ($F(1, 172) = 4.06, p < .05$). Follow up spotlight analysis showed that when others are asking basic questions, there is a significant difference in participants’ feelings of embarrassment when asking basic level question ($M = 2.98$) versus advanced level questions ($M = 2.02, F(1, 172) = -2.53, p = .01$). When others have asked advanced level questions, participants were more embarrassed to ask basic question ($M = 3.65$) compared to more advanced questions ($M = 1.62, F(1, 172) = -5.37, p = .00$).

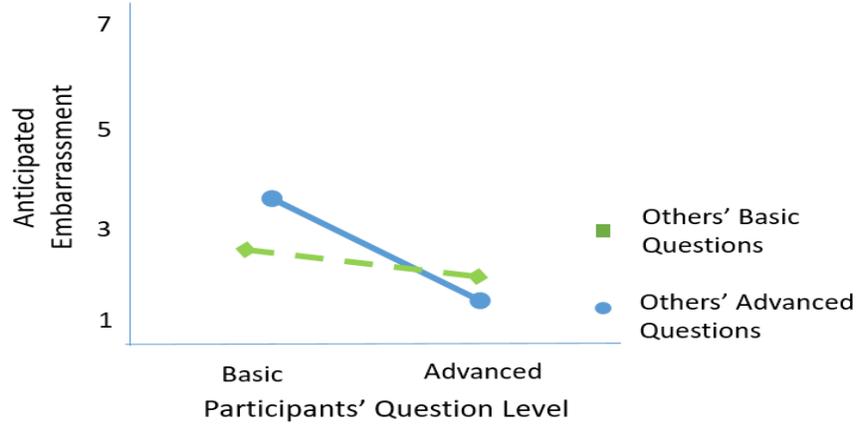


Figure 5. Anticipated Embarrassment, Study 2 – interaction of participants’ question levels and others’ question levels on the online product forum.

Mediation Analysis. For a mediation analysis, I used Hayes’ (2013) PROCESS macro with 5,000 bootstrapped samples (model 8), the indirect effect was $\beta = 0.5616$ ($SE = .2919$), with a 95% bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence interval (CI) that excluded zero (95% CI [.0224, 1.1718]). These findings provide evidence that the mediational path predicting one’s willingness to ask a question depending on its difficulty level is conditioned on the anticipated feelings of embarrassment.

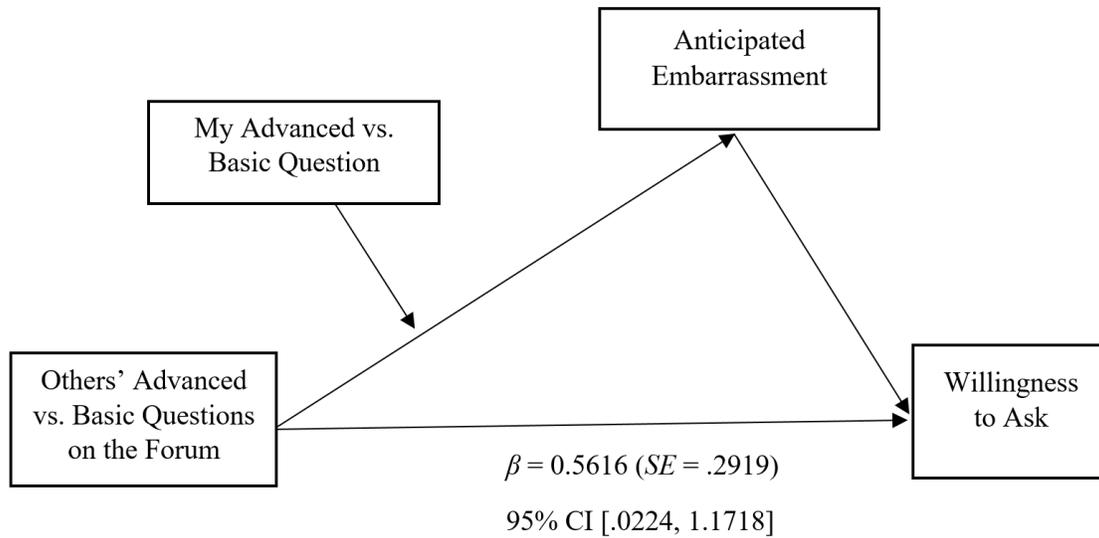


Figure 6. Mediation Analysis, Study 2 – anticipated embarrassment mediates the interactive effect of participants’ question level and others’ question level on participants’ willingness to ask on the forum.

Discussion

The results of study 2 replicate those of study 1. Again, supporting hypotheses 1, when the questions posed by others in a public forum were advanced, participants were less likely to ask for help if their own questions were perceived as basic compared to when they also had more advanced questions to ask. However, when others’ questions were more basic, participants’ own level of question difficulty had no significant effect on willingness to ask. In addition, supporting Hypothesis 2, participants anticipated more embarrassment when others have asked advanced questions, but their own questions were perceived as more basic, compared to when their own questions were more advanced.

Finally, the anticipated embarrassment was shown to mediate the willingness to ask for help. If indeed participants' embarrassment and reluctance to ask for help are associated with beliefs of a violation of competence norms, then we would expect that manipulations that diminished the impact of such a violation should also attenuate the reluctance to ask. Drawing on symbolic interactionist theory and literature on disclaimers, study 3 investigates this.

Study 3: Moderating Reluctance to Seek Help with Public Self-Assessment

If concern about being negatively judged for violating a forum norm is driving reluctance to ask for help, then incorporating methods known to diminish negative judgments for norm violations should mitigate this effect. As noted above, research shows that publicly acknowledging one's own socially unacceptable behavior prior to acting can reduce negative judgment from others (Brennan et al. 2013). By signaling to others that a norm-violating behavior is not undertaken unknowingly or ignorantly, a consumer can manage expectations and minimize accountability, so that others will not be taken off guard (Hewitt and Stokes 1975; McLuhan et al., 2014). Thus, the primary goal of study 3 is to investigate how publicly acknowledging the difficulty of one's own question, and thereby acknowledging that a competence norm is being violated, reduces anticipated negative judgments from others, which in turn increases consumers' likelihood of asking a basic level question where others have asked advanced level questions.

A second goal of study 3 is to enhance generalizability of the findings. Although in study 1 participants generated their own questions about computers, and in study 2 they selected from a set of commonly asked questions, it is likely that participants had less desire to find answers to these questions compared when facing actual difficulty achieving a goal. So one could argue that the effects observed in those studies only occur in scenario based simulations where overall desire to obtain help is quite low. In addition, since questions were independently generated (study 1) or selected from a limited set (study 2), there may be concern that any unique aspects of the problems beyond revealing level of competence had an impact on willingness to ask for help. Therefore, this study employs a method, adopted from previous research by Norton, Mochon, and Ariely (2012), in which participants have an actual product assembly goal (an origami bird). That study explored liking and valuing of self-made products. Here, participants are intentionally given instructions with omitted steps, so that all participants face the same active goal and the same problem, and requesting assistance is likely to help them.

Because studies 1 and 2 found willingness to ask for help was affected by others' competence level only when one had a question regarding a novice level problem, this study only examines the conditions in which participants face a novice level problem. So all participants are tasked with creating a novice level origami bird with an early step in the instructions omitted. As in the prior studies, the difficulty of others' questions in the online forum were manipulated to be either basic or advanced levels (questions about steps in creating novice or advanced level origami birds).

Method

Participants recruited through an undergraduate subject pool at the University of Texas at Austin ($N = 172$; $M_{\text{age}} = 21$; 59.3% female) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. This was a 2 (Others' Questions on the Online Forum: Basic, Advanced) \times 2 (Public pre-disclosure of own level of question difficulty, Control) between-subjects design.

Upon starting the survey, all participants were told that the study is partnering with a company that sells origami kits. Participants were shown examples of birds that consumers could make using the kit (Appendix C). Prior to beginning the assembly, participants' level of skill and interest in origami were measured with following items. Skill items: 1. "How often do you create paper origami objects? (1 = Never tried making a paper origami before, 7 = I make paper origami often)." 2. "How would you rate your skills in making paper origami objects? (1 = I'm very bad at making paper origami, 7 = I'm very good at making paper origami)" Interest items: 1. "How important is it for you to be good at making a paper origami? (1 = Not at all important, 7 = Very important)." 2. "How valuable is it for you to be good at making a paper origami? (1 = Not at all valuable, 7 = Very valuable)." 3. "How interested are you in developing your paper origami skills? (1 = Not interested at all, 7 = Very interested)" These measures were collected to ensure that no chance differences existed between the conditions, and to use as potential covariates in the analysis, should chance differences be observed.

Next, participants were given a list of origami symbols (Appendix C) and told that they would be given further instructions to create an origami bird. A photograph of the

finished project was included. They were also told that if they encounter trouble with the instructions, that available to them was an online forum dedicated to the Bird Series Origami Kit provided by the Origami Company. Participants were told that they could view the forum on the computers in the lab, and could decide whether they would like to ask their own questions on the forum.

Next, all participants were then given the steps required to make the origami bird. One step was shown on the screen at a time, along with a picture of the finished product. At each step, they could advance, go back, or switch screens to consult the online forum, at will. To ensure that all of the participants would require help while working on the task, of 9 steps required in the original origami instruction, steps 2, 4, and 6 were omitted in the instruction of the present study.

After each step, participants were given an opportunity to move on to the next step or consult the Origami Company's Bird Series Online Forum to ask for hints. When participants decided to consult the online forum, they were first asked to describe the problem that they wished to have solved and created an account for the website by creating an ID. Next, they typed the question that they wanted answered into a text box.

Participants in the Self-Assessment condition were asked to identify the difficulty of their question with the following instructions. "Your assessment of your question will be linked to your question on the website. Everyone who views your question will be able to view your assessment. Compared to the questions posted on the online forum by others, how difficult is your question?" Participants chose one of the three options: "a basic question that requires beginner level origami knowledge, an intermediate question

that requires average level origami knowledge, an advanced question that requires near-expert level origami knowledge.” In addition, participants indicated the difficulty level of their question (Level 1 ~ Level 9). Participants in the control condition did not answer these questions.

Participants in all conditions were told that they could mark the question as ‘solved,’ once they receive a satisfying answer from an expert. Then, they were shown how their question will be publicly displayed, so that they could check their question before making a decision to post it and see that their self-assessment of question difficulty would be displayed. The format was identical to other questions that were already posted on the online forum: participant’s ID, their question, and a space that indicated questions as ‘solved’. Those in the self-assessment condition could also see their own assessed level of the question, while those in the control condition did not.

When participants entered the Bird Series Origami Online Forum prepared by the Origami Company, they were able to see six questions posted by other consumers regarding some of the bird origami products (Appendix C). Along with other consumers’ questions, participants were able to see pictures of the final paper origami products that each consumer needed help with. Next to their questions and pictures of origami problems, the level of each question was presented. Depending on the condition, the questions asked by others were either about similarly simple origami projects, or about highly complex projects. Simple and complex projects were initially selected from examples in the Guidelines for Origami Difficulty by Origami USA

(<https://origamiusa.org/difficulty>). Moreover, a pretest confirmed that participants perceived the simple projects as less difficult than the complex projects.

Finally, all participants were asked if they'd like to post their question at this moment. They could either choose to post their question ("Yes, I would like to post my question on this online forum now"), or choose not to post their question ("No, I would like to try making the paper origami some more on my own before asking my question on this online forum").

Results

Prior to the analysis, participants' level of skill and interest in origami were computed. Two skill items were averaged to create a single measure of skill level ($\alpha = .79$). Three interest items were averaged to create a single measure of interest level ($\alpha = .75$). Then, participants' level of skill and interest in origami were used as dependent variables in an ANOVA with others' question level condition (Basic, Advanced) and public self-assessment condition (Yes vs. No) as independent variables. No differences between conditions were found (Skill: $F(1, 165) = .553, p > .30$; Interest: $F(1, 165) = .47, p > .30$).

To confirm that participants regarded their question as basic, I examined their response to the self-assessment questions. On average, participants in the self-assessed condition marked their question as easy. 86% of the participants indicated that their question is a basic question that requires beginner level origami knowledge, 11.6% indicated their question as an intermediate question that requires average level origami knowledge, and 2.3% indicated their question as an advanced question that requires near-

expert level origami knowledge. For the scale question indicating the difficulty level of their own question, 67.4% indicated their question as Level 1, 12.8% as Level 2, 7.0% as Level 3, 1.2% as Level 4, 4.7% as Level 5, 2.3% as Level 6, 3.5% as Level 7, and 1.2% as Level 9. I found that there was no difference in the ratings across conditions ($F(1, 84) = 1.59, p > .10$).

Next, willingness to ask for help was examined using a chi-square test (Figure 7). The results show that consumers' decisions to ask basic questions on an online forum depends on the level of others' questions on the forum as well as the opportunity to publicly self-assess their questions ($\chi^2(3) = 8.19, p < .05$). Among participants in the advanced others conditions, those who did not have the opportunity to publicly self-assess their question difficulty were less likely to post a question to the forum ($M = 17.1\%$) compared to those who in the public self-assessment condition ($M = 42.2\%$; $\chi^2(1) = 6.43, p = .01$). This shows that public self-assessment opportunity increased consumers' willingness to ask a basic level question on a forum where others asked advanced level questions.

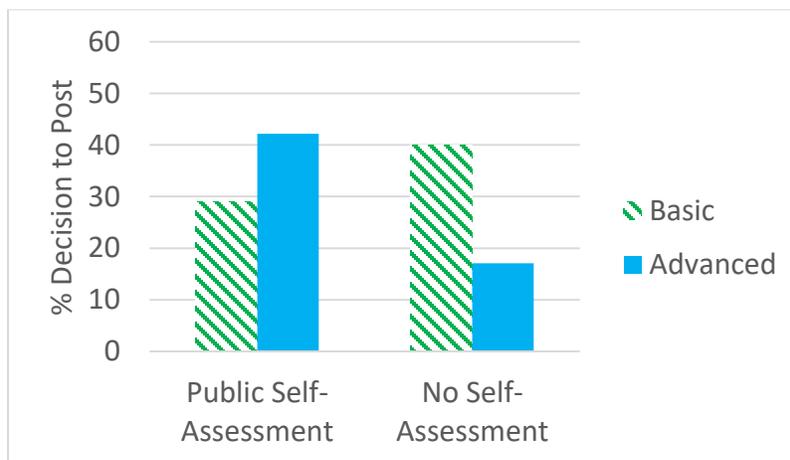


Figure 7. Percentage of participants who decided to ask their basic questions on the forum, Study 3 – interaction of opportunity for public self-assessment and others' question levels on the online product forum.

Among participants in the conditions where others asked basic level questions, there was no difference between those in the control ($M = 40\%$) and the public self-assessment conditions ($M = 26.8\%$) of the participants in the self-assessment condition decided to post questions on a basic forum ($\chi^2 (1) = .19, p > .10$).

In other words, in the control conditions, 40% of the participants chose to ask their basic level question on a basic level forum while 17.1% of the participants chose to ask on an advanced level forum ($\chi^2 (1) = 5.47, p < .02$). Yet, this large difference in decision to ask a basic level question diminished when consumers were given an opportunity to publicly self-assess the level of their own question. In the public self-assessment conditions, 26.8% of the participants were willing to ask their basic question on a basic forum while 42.2% of the participants were willing to ask on an advanced level forum ($\chi^2 (1) = .13, p > .10$).

Discussion

Using a task that involves participants to solve an actual encountered problem, study 3 confirmed the hypothesis 3. When consumers were given an opportunity to publicly acknowledge their question as basic, they became more willing to ask their relatively novice level question on the forum where others had asked more advanced level questions. Thus, the findings support my hypothesis that people are reluctant to ask their questions due to concern for violation of competence norms in the forum. However,

providing the disclaimer allows participants to do so with reduced concern for negative judgment or punishment. In the next study, I aim to explicitly test why consumers are more willing to ask their novice level questions, even when others' questions on the forum are at advanced levels, after publicly assessing their question level as basic. Thus, study 4 investigates the underlying mechanism for the effect found in study 3 by measuring participants' awareness and concern for violating the competence norm.

Study 4: Public Self-Assessment, a Moderated Mediation Study

Study 4 makes three important contributions. First, this study seeks to replicate the moderating effect of public self-assessment on reluctance to ask for help in an environment when one's own question is less advanced than questions that others have asked. For robustness, in this study, like studies 1 and 2, participants are asked to consider posting questions about computers on an online forum.

Second, I have argued that consumers' reluctance to ask basic level questions where others' questions are more advanced is due to concern for others' negative judgment for violating a norm of the forum. Study 3 showed that, consistent with prior work on disclaimers (Hewitt and Stokes 1975), if a help seeker first publicly acknowledges awareness of his or her basic question, reluctance to request help is attenuated. I argued that this is because public self-assessment serves to signal to others that one is knowingly violating a norm, and as a result they perceive it as less unacceptable to do so. It is important to highlight that it is the public recognition by the

help seeker that he or she is aware of the transgression, and not merely the belief that others are pre-warned that the transgression will occur that is driving this.

To provide stronger evidence of this, in this study, in addition to a public self-assessment and a control condition, a third condition is included. Here, participants' level of question difficulty is posted for all to see (as it is in the self-assessment condition), but this is not communicated by the help-seeker. Instead in this "others' judgment" condition, it is others on the forum who pre-judge and report the level of question difficulty. It is expected that despite knowing that others will be explicitly aware of the difficulty level of their question, participants will be as reluctant to post the question as in the control condition. Indeed it is this expectation of judgment by others that is argued to decrease willingness to ask for help. So it is expected that when one has a relatively less advanced question he or she will be equally reluctant to ask for help in the control and others-judgment condition. Only in the self-assessment condition, when it is the participant who willingly offers an assessment of the question prior to asking for help that reluctance to post is expected to be attenuated.

Building on this, the third goal of study 4 was to directly test the mediating role of perceived communication of violation of the norm. Thus measurements are taken of participants' beliefs that they are communicating awareness of the norm, and that they are communicating that others know that they are aware of their own question level. These measures are included in a mediation analysis to explore whether the perceptions of public recognition of norm violations indeed mediate the willingness to ask for help when one's question may violate a competency norm.

Method

Two hundred and ninety six participants recruited through an online subject pool, Prolific ($M_{\text{age}} = 40.25$; 58.1% female) were randomly assigned to conditions. The design was a 2 (Others' Questions on the Online Forum: Basic, Advanced) \times 3 (Public Self-Assessment, Public Others' Assessment, Control) between-subjects design. Participants were paid for their participation and were also given a chance to enter a lottery by answering questions about the contents of the instructions and scenarios of the study. This was done to ensure that participants paid full attention throughout the survey.

As in study 3, in this study all participants considered whether to post basic level questions to an online forum in which others had already posted either basic or advanced level questions. After a brief description of an online computer troubleshooting forum, participants were told to think of a situation when they could not hear any sound from their computer speaker even when powered on. While there are many ways to seek help to solve their sound problem, they were to consider whether to ask the following question on the forum: "I cannot hear any sound from my speaker even when powered on. What are some things I could check for?" Participants then indicated the perceived difficulty and urgency in solving this if they were to actually face this problem. The two measures were averaged as a measure of perceived difficulty of the problem: 1. "Figuring out proper solutions to my audio problem would be challenging for me." 2. "I think my audio problem is fairly difficult" (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree). The following two measures were averaged as a measure of perceived urgency: 1. "It is urgent for me to

solve this sound issue.” 2. “It is important for me to quickly resolve this audio issue” (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree).

Next, participants were directed to a computer troubleshooting online forum (see Appendix D for study materials). Upon entering the forum, participants were given the same introduction as study 2, which indicated that all of the questions posted on the forum would be properly answered in a timely manner by computer experts. Participants were reminded that all of the questions posted on the forum can be viewed by anyone who visits the online forum (i.e. consumers of computer products, visitors browsing the website, and experts working at computer companies). Then, participants created their IDs to register for the forum. The manipulation of others’ question levels were the same as study 1 and study 2. Half of the participants were led to a forum where everyone asked basic level questions (levels 1 and 2) that were successfully answered. Another half of the participants were led to a forum where everyone asked advanced level questions (levels 8 and 9) that were successfully answered.

Those in the self-assessment condition were told that they will rate the level of their questions, and that their ratings will be publicly displayed next to their question. Then, the participants were asked, “Compared to the questions posted on the online forum by others, how difficult is your question?” They were to choose one of the three options: “a basic question that requires beginner level computer knowledge, an intermediate question that requires average level computer knowledge, an advanced question that requires near-expert level computer knowledge.” In addition, participants indicated the level of their question (level 1 ~ 9). Participants in the other-assessment

condition were told that people who are viewing their questions will rate the level of their question, and that the ratings that others provide will be publicly displayed (level 1 ~ 9).

Participants in both self-assessment and other-assessment conditions were shown how their question will be publicly displayed, so that they could check their question before making a decision to post their question. The format was identical to other questions that were already posted on the online forum: participant's ID, their question, the self-assessed or other-assessed level of their question, and a blank space for them to indicate as 'solved' when they receive a satisfying answer from an expert. Participants in the control condition were not given any information regarding public assessment.

Then, participants responded to the following two willingness to ask questions: 1. "I would like to participate in the above online page by asking my audio question." 2. "I am willing to ask my audio question on the above online page (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree). The responses to these two questions were averaged for the analysis ($\alpha = .92$). Afterwards, participants responded to two mediational measures: 1. "Others will think that I am at least respectful of the standards of this forum." 2. "Others will know that I at least know that my question is easy compared to the standards of this forum" (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree).

One may argue that participants who have seen others' advanced level questions may want to make more effort on solving the problem on their own, rather than asking on the online forum. To control for this possibility, I collected measures of intended effort: 1. "How much effort would you spend to try solving the issue on your own before asking your audio question on the above [Level 1 and Level 2 / Level 8 and Level 9] online

forum? (1 = I will not exert any effort. I will ask on the online forum right away, 9 = I will exert as much effort as I can to solve the issue on my own).” 2. “If you were in this situation, and had a couple of hours of free time, how many minutes would you spend to try to solve the audio problem on your own before asking your question on the above [Level 1 and Level 2 / Level 8 and Level 9] online forum?” To control for the possibility that participants would expect to receive better answers by posting questions in the forum that includes others’ advanced level questions than those posting on the forum that includes others’ basic level questions, I asked participants, “If you ask your question on the above online forum page, how likely do you think it is for you to get proper answers to your questions? (1 = highly unlikely, 9 = highly likely).” Lastly, participants rated their audio question levels from level 1 ~ level 9 scale (level 1 = a basic question, 9 = an advanced question).

Results

As in study 3, all participants had an easy question to ask on the forum. The study 4 was a 2 (Others’ Questions on the Online Forum: Basic, Advanced) × 3 (Self-Assessment, Other-Assessment, Control) between-subjects design. The main dependent variable in this study was participants’ willingness to post a question on the forum.

Manipulation Checks. First, I conducted several manipulation check analyses. To confirm that all participants viewed the problem as basic, I computed the average of perceived difficulty of the problem measures ($\alpha = .88$). Then I conducted ANOVA with forum level and assessment as independent variables and found no main effects nor interaction ($ps > .10$). Across all conditions, participants viewed the problem as fairly

easy to fix ($M = 3.81$; t-test compared to the midpoint of the scale $t(296) = -5.70, p < .01$). To confirm that all participants viewed the problem as a fairly urgent one, I computed the average of perceived urgency measures ($\alpha = .93$). Then I conducted ANOVA with forum level and assessment conditions as independent variables and found no main effects nor interaction ($ps > .10$). Across all conditions, participants viewed the problem as a fairly urgent one ($M = 6.26$; t-test compared to the midpoint of the scale: $t(296) = 15.36, p < .01$). Next, I conducted another manipulation check by performing ANOVA with forum level and assessment conditions as independent variables and the perceived level of their own question as a dependent variable, and found no significant main or interaction effects ($ps > .10$). All participants perceived their level of question as basic ($M = 2.52$; t-test compared to the midpoint of the scale: $t(296) = -22.182, p < .01$). Lastly, I conducted ANOVA with others' question level and assessment conditions as independent variables and the likelihood of getting a proper answer as a dependent variable, and found no significant main or interaction effects ($p > .10$). All participants expected that they will get a proper answer for their question, regardless of the level of forum they viewed ($M = 7.49$). Thus, across all conditions, participants viewed their problem as fairly easy to fix and urgent. They also perceived their questions as basic and that they will get proper answer to their question regardless of the conditions.

Willingness to Ask. For the main analysis, I conducted ANOVA with others' question level and assessment conditions as independent variables and participants' willingness to ask as a dependent variable. The main effect of forum level was significant ($F(1, 290) = 33.14, p < .001$). The main effect of assessment conditions was marginally

significant ($F(2, 290) = 2.62, p = .07$). The significant interaction showed that consumers' decisions to ask their basic questions on an online forum depends on the levels of others' questions on the forum as well as their ability to publicly self-assess the levels of their questions ($F(2, 290) = 3.74, p < .05$). Among participants in the others' advanced question conditions, the participants in the self-assessment condition ($M = 6.74$) were more willing to post their question on the forum more than those in the other-assessment ($M = 5.46$) and control conditions ($M = 5.26; F(2, 290) = 2.91, p = .003$). Participants in the others' basic questions conditions were equally willing to post their questions, regardless of the self-assessment ($M = 7.23$), other-assessment ($M = 7.42$), and control ($M = 7.32$) conditions ($F(2, 290) = -.39, p = .69$).

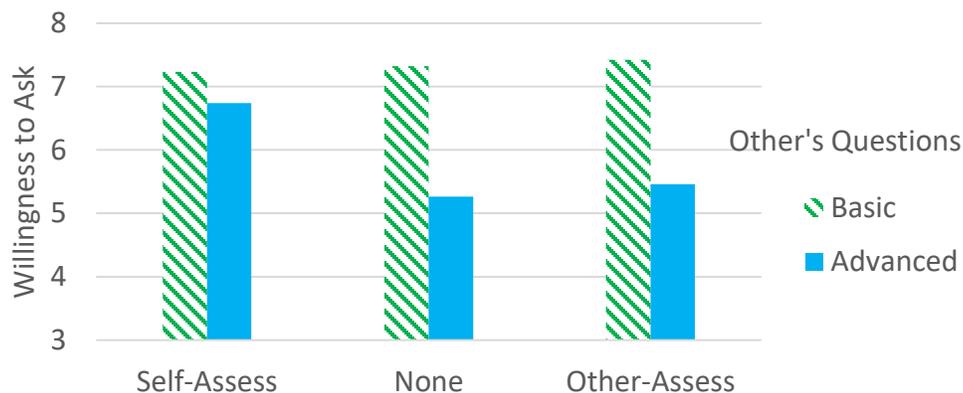


Figure 8. Willingness to Ask, Study 4 – interaction of opportunity for public assessment and others' question levels on the online product forum.

To control for the amount of effort that individuals gave, I first standardized each of the effort measures and created an average of the two standardized measures of effort ($\alpha = .62$). Then, I used this as a covariate in our analysis. The result showed that the

effect holds, even after controlling the amount of effort that individuals are willing to give ($F(2, 289) = 2.74, p = .06$). To control for the expectation of receiving a proper answer to their question, that variable was included as a covariate in the analysis. The result showed that the effect holds, even after controlling for the likelihood of getting a proper answer ($F(2, 289) = 3.177, p < .05$).

Norm Awareness. The results also showed that self-assessment successfully communicate to others that participants are aware of the norm ($F(2, 290) = 3.90, p = .02$). In an advanced forum, participants in the self-assessment condition believed that others will know that they are aware of the norm ($M = 7.35$) more than those in the other-assessment ($M = 5.79$) and the control ($M = 6.10$) conditions ($F(2, 290) = 4.70, p = .00$). There was no difference in others' awareness of the norm among the self-assessment ($M = 6.50$), other-assessment ($M = 5.97$), and control conditions ($M = 6.52$) in a basic forum ($F(2, 290) = 1.52, p = .13$).

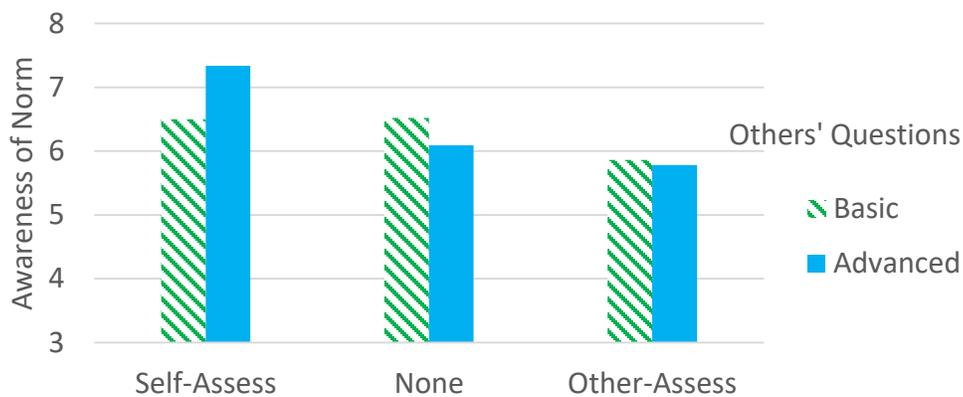


Figure 9. Awareness of Norm Communicated to Others, Study 4 – interaction of opportunity for public assessment and others’ question levels on the online product forum.

Mediation Analysis. Next, I examined the expressed awareness of the norm hypothesis, that the impact of others’ question difficulty and assessment conditions on willingness to ask a question on a forum is driven by the perceived communication of the norm awareness. Using the recommended technique for testing conditional indirect effects (Hayes 2013), process analysis (model 8) confirmed evidence of mediation. The effect of others’ question difficulty on willingness to ask a question was mediated by participants’ expressed awareness of the norm (Figure 10). I tested this using Hayes’ (2013) PROCESS macro with 5,000 bootstrapped samples. The indirect effect was $\beta = 0.1343$ ($SE = .0588$), with a 95% bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence interval (CI) that excluded zero (95% CI [.0417, .2707]). In addition, I found that communication of awareness of one’s question difficulty also mediated the effect of others’ question difficulty on willingness to ask a question. The indirect effect was $\beta = 0.0543$ ($SE = .0355$), with a 95% bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence interval (CI) that excluded zero (95% CI [.0012, .1460]). When I conducted a multiple mediation test with both ‘awareness of the norm’ and ‘awareness of one’s question difficulty,’ ‘awareness of the norm’ was found to be the stronger mediator ($\beta = .1189$, $SE = .0586$; 95% CI [.0324, .2650]) than ‘awareness of one’s question difficulty’ ($\beta = .0199$, $SE = .0246$; 95% CI [-.0115, .0949]). In addition, I tested the mediation including the amount of effort as well as the likelihood of getting a proper answer as covariates. The result showed that the

mediation model still holds with the two covariates included in the model ($\beta = .0574$; $SE = .0331$; 95% CI [.0119, .1489]). These findings provide evidence that the mediational path predicting willingness to ask from difficulty level of questions is conditioned on the publicly expressed awareness of the norm.

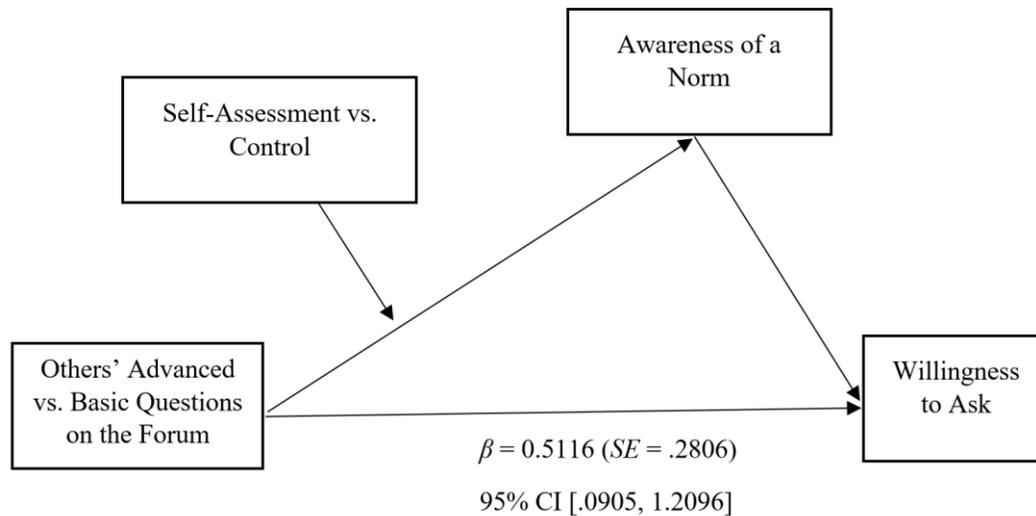


Figure 10. Mediation Analysis, Study 4 – Awareness of a norm mediates the interactive effect of opportunity for public assessment and others’ question levels on participants’ willingness to ask basic question on the forum.

Discussion

This moderated mediation study replicated the effect in which individuals are less willing to ask for help when their own request is perceived as showing less competence than requests for help that are typically asked. Further, as in the prior study, the results showed that publicly communicating that one is aware of the level of sophistication of a more basic level question attenuates reluctance to ask for help. The fact that is occurred only when the judgment of the question difficulty came from the

participant and not from others on the forum offered further evidence that it is this public acknowledgement of violation of a norm that drives the attenuation. Finally, the mediation analysis offered additional evidence that publicly acknowledging their question as basic allows consumers to communicate their awareness of the norm that is being violated, which in turn increases their willingness to ask a novice level question in a forum where others have asked an advanced level questions. Thus, the results of study 4 support hypothesis 4. Moreover, the finding that there was similar reluctance to ask for help in both the control and others' judgment conditions suggests that indeed consumers' concern about judgment by others is a cause of unwillingness to request help.

Although studies 3 and 4 explored public self-assessment a moderator of willingness to ask for assistance when one perceives a violation of a norm of competence, it is possible that other information may similarly attenuate reluctance to ask for assistance. Studies 5 through 8 seek to address this. In these studies I explore the role of affirming competence in other domains, perception of other norms in the forum, and perceptions of costs or benefits to answering questions on a forum, which may similarly attenuate help-seeking reluctance.

Study 5: Public Achievement-Signaling

The purpose of study 5 is to examine whether affirmation of competence in other domains may attenuate reluctance to ask for help in a domain where one is concerned about violation of a competence norm. As noted in the introduction, prior work on self-threat suggest that affirming an alternative source of self-integrity can allow individuals

to maintain an overall positive self-image (Steele 1988). Such self-affirmations include “reflecting on important aspects of one’s life irrelevant to the threat, or engaging in an activity that makes salient important values unconnected to the threatening event” (p.186, Sherman and Cohen 2006). When focusing on domains of self-integrity unrelated to the threat, people realize that their self-worth does not hinge on the evaluative implications of the immediate situation (Steele and Liu 1983). This enables individuals to deal with threatening events and information without running away or hurting. Thus, I propose that consumers could publicly affirm an alternative source of self-integrity, such as their competence in domains unrelated to the one where they are seeking help. When people visit the online product forum, they can publicly share some of their valuable achievements. For instance, when needing to ask a question about computers, a consumer could publicly share his or her achievements in international rhetoric competitions.

For robustness, this study has two control conditions. In addition to a condition in which no information is shared, in a second condition participants are asked to share their interests prior to asking for help on the forum. In this way, like the alternative competence (self-affirmation) condition, participants share information about themselves. However, because the information does not signal competence, it is not expected to mitigate concern for negative judgments. So it is expected that participants will be equally likely to avoid asking for help in this condition as in the no-information condition. Yet, sharing an alternative domain of competence (self-affirmation) is expected to attenuate reluctance to ask for help.

Method

Participants recruited through an online pool ($N = 382$; $M_{\text{age}} = 37.58$; 58.4% female) were randomly assigned to conditions. This study was 2 (Others' Questions on the Online Forum: Basic, Advanced) x 3 (Self-Affirmation: Achievements, Interests, Control) between-subjects design (see Appendix E for the study materials). All participants asked a basic question in this study. Participants were paid for their participation and were also given a chance to enter a lottery if they had answered bonus questions about the content of the instructions and scenarios of the study. This was done to ensure that participants paid full attention throughout the survey.

Basic Computer Question. The introduction of the online forum was similar to study 4. After a brief description of an online computer troubleshooting forum, participants were told to think of a situation when they could not hear any sound from their speaker even when powered on. While there are many ways to seek help to solve their sound problem, they were to decide whether to ask the following question on the forum or not: "I cannot hear any sound from my speaker even when powered on. What are some things I could check for?" Participants then indicated the perceived difficulty of the problem using the following two measures: 1. "Figuring out proper solutions to my audio problem would be challenging for me." 2. "I think my audio problem is fairly difficult" (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree). The measures were averaged to form 'question difficulty' measure ($\alpha = .89$).

Prior to considering asking their question, participants were randomly assigned to the achievement, interest and control conditions. All participants were asked to introduce

themselves to other members of the forum. Those in the control condition were told to just offer greetings to other members of the forum, those in the achievement and interest conditions were told to focus on their achievements or interests accordingly. Specifically, those in the achievement condition were asked to think of things not related to computers or technology that they are not only interested and competent in, but also have made concrete achievements that others recognize. Then, they wrote 5-7 sentences describing their achievements, how they were able to accomplish such achievements, and why they are important to them. Those in the interest condition, were asked think about an interest that they might have that is not related to computers or technology. Then, they wrote 5-7 sentences describing how they developed such interest and why it is important to them.

The manipulation of others' question levels were the same as study 1 and study 2. Half of the participants were led to a forum where everyone asked basic level questions (levels 1 and 2) that were successfully answered. Another half of the participants were led to a forum where everyone asked advanced level questions (levels 8 and 9) that were successfully answered.

Then, participants indicated how comfortable they would feel to ask their question on the online forum (1 = I am not comfortable at all, 7 = I am very comfortable), as well as how willing they would be to ask (1 = I am not willing at all, 7 = I am very willing). These measures were averaged to form the 'willingness to ask' measure ($\alpha = .88$).

Lastly, participants responded to three types of mediational measures: Concern for others' negative judgment, concern for violating the norm, and anticipated feelings of embarrassment. The 'concern for others' negative judgment' items were: 1. "I am

concerned about being seen as incompetent.” 2. “I am concerned about others’ negative judgment of my ability” (1= not at all, 9 = very much). These measures were averaged to form the ‘concern for other’s negative judgment’ measure ($\alpha = .83$).

The ‘concern for violating the norm’ items were: 1. “Others will think that I am ignorant of the standards of this forum.” 2. “Others will think that my question is very basic compared to the standards of this forum” (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree). These measures were averaged to form the ‘concern for norm violation’ measure ($\alpha = .79$).

Participants indicated their anticipated feelings of embarrassment and shame if they were to ask their question on the forum on nine point scales (1 = not at all, 9 = very much). These measures were averaged to form the ‘anticipated embarrassment’ measure ($\alpha = .86$).

Results

Manipulation Checks. To confirm that all participants viewed the speaker problem as basic, the perceived difficulty of the problem items were averaged to create a single measures ($\alpha = .89$). An ANOVA with forum level (others asked difficult vs. others asked easy questions) and achievement (control, stated interests, stated achievements) as independent variables and found no main effects nor interaction ($p > .10$). Across all conditions, participants viewed the problem as fairly easy to fix ($M = 3.00$; t-test compared to the midpoint of the scale: $t(382) = -21.82, p < .01$).

An ANOVA with others’ question level and achievement conditions as independent variables and the likelihood of getting a proper answer as a dependent

variable also revealed no significant main or interaction effects ($p > .10$). All participants expected that they if they were to ask the question, they would be able to get a proper answer, regardless of the level of forum they viewed ($M = 7.14$; t-test compared to the midpoint of the scale: $t(382) = -21.66, p < .01$).

Willingness to Ask. For the main analysis, an ANOVA with others' question level and achievement conditions as independent variables and participants' willingness to ask as a dependent variable was run. The main effect of forum level was significant ($F(1, 376) = 54.82, p < .001$). As in prior studies, participants were more reluctant to ask their basic level question when others' questions were perceived as more advanced ($M = 4.99$) than when others' questions were perceived as basic ($M = 6.73$). The main effect of achievement conditions was not significant ($F(2, 376) = .70, p > .30$). The interaction was also not significant ($F(2, 376) = 1.63, p > .10$). Refer to the Appendix E for the mean results.

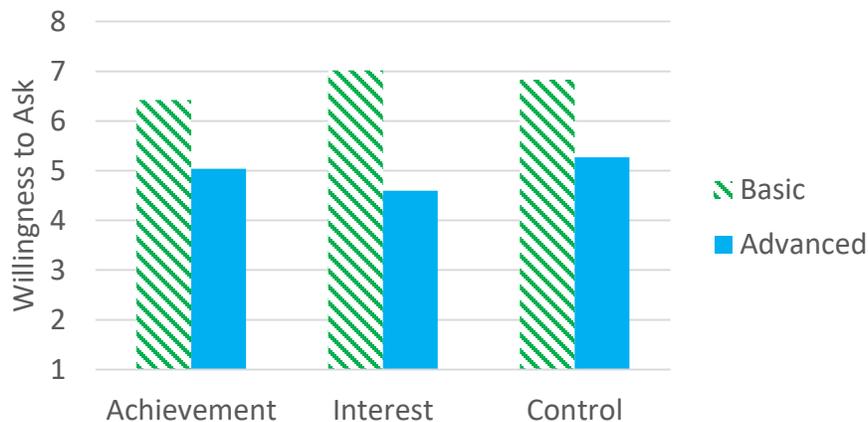


Figure 11. Willingness to Ask, Study 5 – interaction of opportunity for public self-assessment and others' question levels on the online product forum.

Concern for Others' Negative Judgment. An ANOVA with others' question level and achievement conditions as independent variables and the concern for others' negative judgment as a dependent variable was run. The significant main effect of other's question level confirmed that participants were more concerned about others' negative judgment when others were asking more advanced questions ($M = 5.38$) than when others were asking basic questions ($M = 3.32$; $F(1, 376) = 61.82, p < .01$). However, the main effect of achievement conditions was not significant ($F(2, 376) = .365, p > .30$). The interaction effect was also not significant ($F(2, 376) = .27, p > .30$). See Appendix E for the mean results.

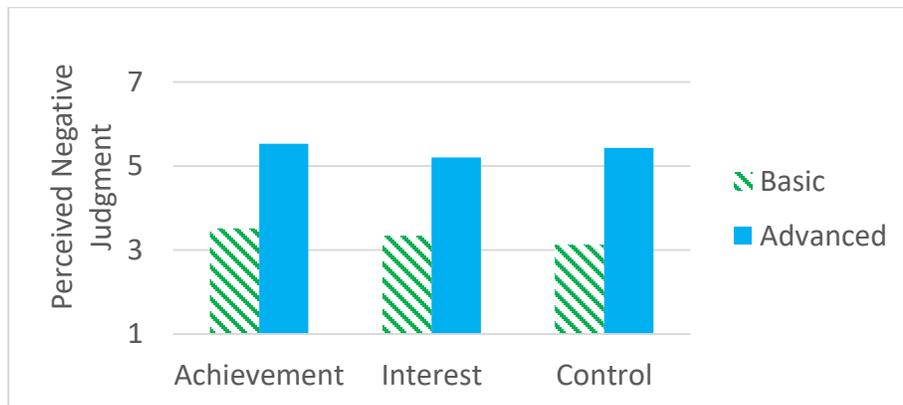


Figure 12. Anticipated Negative Judgment from Others, Study 5 – interaction of opportunity for public self-affirmation and others' question levels on the online product forum.

Norm Awareness. An ANOVA with others' question level and achievement conditions as independent variables and the norm awareness as a dependent variable was run. The significant main effect of other's question level showed that participants believed that others are aware of one's violation of a norm when others were asking more

advanced questions ($M = 6.51$) than when others were asking basic questions ($M = 5.27$; $F(1, 376) = 30.30, p < .01$). However, the main effect of achievement conditions was not significant ($F(2, 376) = .07, p > .30$). The interaction effect was also not significant ($F(2, 376) = 1.01, p > .30$). Thus, the results showed that achievement did not reduce concern for norm violation. See Appendix E for the mean results.

Anticipated Embarrassment. An ANOVA with others' question level and achievement conditions as independent variables and the anticipated embarrassment as a dependent variable was run. The significant main effect of other's question level showed that participants anticipated embarrassment when others were asking more advanced questions ($M = 4.29$) than when others were asking basic questions ($M = 2.72$; $F(1, 376) = 42.49, p < .01$). However, the main effect of achievement conditions was not significant ($F(2, 376) = .40, p > .30$). The interaction effect was also not significant ($F(2, 376) = .08, p > .30$). Thus, the results also showed that achievement did not reduce feelings of embarrassment. See Appendix E for the mean results.

Discussion

Study 5 again showed that individuals with a relatively easy question are less willing to ask for assistance in a forum where others have asked more difficult questions compared to one where others have asked similarly easy questions. Also, consistent with prior studies, the results also suggested that those asking easy questions in forums where others' questions are more sophisticated, that they were more concerned about being seen as incompetent, more concerned about violating a norm of the forum, and anticipate greater embarrassment.

Unlike in studies 3 and 4 in which reluctance to ask for help was attenuated when participants offered an assessment of their own question difficulty, here, disclosing one's achievements or interests to those on the forum did not influence willingness to ask for help. Moreover, doing so did not reduce consumers' concern for being judged as incompetent, concern for norm violation, nor feelings of embarrassment.

Although the observed null effect of the achievement manipulation may result due to limited effect size or limited sample size, there are alternative reasons why the achievement manipulation did not influence willingness to request help. These reasons may be associated with the specificity of the achievements that participants' offered, and the fact that the achievement affirmation did not directly address the specific competence norm that is perceived to be violated. Below I expand on this.

Limitation in the Type of Self-Affirmation. One potential reason for ineffectiveness of achievement-affirmation is that it was too domain-specific and not generalizable to a person's integrity as a whole. Integrity can be defined as the sense that one is a good and appropriate person on the whole (Sherman and Cohen 2006). Accordingly, perhaps self-assessment exercises would work better if they affirm one's integrity as a whole person (i.e. broad values) rather than domain-specific integrity (i.e. achievement in baking competitions). Affirming one's important values is one way to boost one's integrity as a whole person, which reduces self-protective responses to threatening information (McQueen and Klein 2006). For example, some self-affirmation manipulations use various domains of values, such as business, art-music-theater, social life-relationships, science-pursuit of knowledge, religion-morality, and government-

politics (e.g. Crocker, Niiya, and Mischkowski 2008; Sherman, Nelson, and Steele 2000). In other studies, researchers have used a different value list that includes creativity, physical attractiveness, athletics, aesthetics, and relations with friends and family (e.g. Schmeichel and Vohs 2009; Cohen, Aronson, and Steele 2000). By reflecting on important values, individuals are able to not only boost self-image and self-worth, but can also transcend such concerns to think beyond themselves (Crocker, Niiya, and Mischkowski 2008; Sherman and Cohen 2006). Instead of writing about one specific achievement, participants' help seeking reluctance may have been mitigated by writing about multiple values that they have, which could span a wide range of aspects in their lives.

Limitation in Targeting Norm Concerns. Another potential reason why affirming achievement in an alternate domain did not attenuate reluctance to ask for help is that doing so does not mitigate the salient concern about violating the competency norm. Note that in Study 4, public self-assessment was perceived as communicating to others that one was aware that they were violating a norm, and this allowed consumers to be more willing to do so. In this study, although publicly stating one's achievements in other domains may communicate one's competence in those particular domains, it still fails to address the concern one might have for violating the relevant competence norm, and it fails to show the individual is aware of the norm transgression.

An alternative approach to considering the way norms may be influencing willingness to ask for help may be to explore situations in which alternative norms would

suggest that it is appropriate to request help even if doing so demonstrates a lack of competence that is typical for the forum. In the next study, I explore this possibility.

Study 6: Communal Norms

If consumers are reluctant to ask basic questions due to anticipated embarrassment and negative judgment from violating a forum's norm of competence, then we might expect that if the forum had an explicit norm that helping others was expected in the community, then a potential help-seeker would be less likely to expect negative judgment nor embarrassment from asking for help in solving a problem that is more basic than the types of problems that are typically solved on the forum. For robustness, this is explored by testing the explicit description of the communal norm of the forum in two ways. So, in one condition, participants learn that the forum has a general communal norm, where forum participants profess their desires to form a helpful online product community with the type of belonging and connection that they have with close friends and family. In a second condition, the communal norm is described as being specific to question asking behaviors, where forum participants acknowledge that asking questions on the forum can help other consumers who may have similar questions, just as answering questions can be helpful.

By examining these two types of communal norms, I aim to understand 1) whether the communal norm set by the online community mitigates the perceived negative judgment from others and influences question-asking behaviors, and 2) whether

the specificity of the communal norm in targeting question-asking behaviors affects the outcome.

Method

Participants recruited through an online pool, Mturk ($N = 342$; $M_{\text{age}} = 36.39$; 56.4% female) were randomly assigned to conditions. This study was a 2 (Others' Questions on the Online Forum: Basic, Advanced) \times 3 (Communal Norm: General, Question-Specific, None) between-subject design, where all participants asked basic questions on the forum (see Appendix F for the study materials).. Participants were paid for their participation and were also given a chance to enter a lottery if they had answered bonus questions about the content of the instructions and scenarios of the study. This was done to ensure that participants paid full attention throughout the survey.

After a brief description of an online computer troubleshooting forum, all participants were told to imagine a situation in which they could not hear any sound from their computer's speaker even when it was powered on (see Appendix F for materials from this study). Participants were told they were to decide whether to ask the following question on the forum or not: "I cannot hear any sound from my speaker even when powered on. What are some things I could check for?" Participants then indicated the perceived difficulty of the problem using the following two items: 1. "Figuring out proper solutions to my audio problem would be challenging for me." 2. "I think my audio problem is fairly difficult" (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree). The measures were averaged to form 'question difficulty' measure ($\alpha = .85$).

Next, all participants were asked to write an introduction about themselves that would be shown to other members of the forum. In the control condition participants were instructed to offer greetings to other members of the forum, In the General Community Norm condition participants were informed that “this online community firmly believes in forming an interpersonal community by helping each other solve computer-related problems. To do so, we encourage each of our forum participants to think of what makes them belong and connected with their closest friends and family. We also ask each of our forum participants to write a short essay (about 6-7 sentences) on what this kind of belonging means to them and how this online community could foster such connection. We encourage you to include your hopes and desires for forming an interpersonal community here.” In the Question-Specific Community Norm condition, participants were informed that “this online community firmly believes in helping each other solve computer-related problems. To do so, we not only encourage our members to answer others’ questions, but more importantly, we strongly advocate our members to ask questions that they have. Remember, your question can help other visitors of this forum who are experiencing similar problem as you. To ensure that this mindset is shared by our forum members, we encourage everyone to write a short essay (about 6-7 sentences) on how they aspire to help others in the online community by both asking their questions and answering others’ questions. In particular, focus on the importance of asking your question to help other visitors of this online forum. We encourage you to include your hopes and desires for forming an interpersonal community here.”

Next, participants were directed to the computer troubleshooting online forum. Upon entering the forum, participants were given the same introduction as study 4. The manipulation of others' question levels were the same as study 1 and study 2 in which other individuals had already asked basic (levels 1 and 2) or advanced level questions (levels 8 and 9) that were successfully answered.

Next, participants provided their willingness to ask for help with their audio problem by responding to the following items: 1. "I would like to participate in the above online page by asking my audio question." 2. "I am willing to ask my audio question on the above online page (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree). The responses to these two questions were averaged for the analysis ($\alpha = .89$).

Finally mediation measures were collected. Concern for being seen as incompetent was measured with the items 1. "I am concerned about being seen as incompetent." and 2. "I am concerned about others' negative judgment of my ability" (1 = not at all, 9 = very much). Lastly, concern for norm violation was measured with the following items. 1. "Others will think that I am ignorant of the standards of this forum." 2. "Others will think that my question is very basic compared to the standards of this forum" (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree). These measures were averaged to form the 'concern for norm violation' measure ($\alpha = .76$).

Results

The study 6 was 2 (Others' Questions on the Online Forum: Basic, Advanced) x 3 (Communal Norm: General, Question-Specific, Control) between-subjects design. All

participants had a basic question to ask on the forum. The main dependent variable in this study was participants' willingness to post a question on the forum.

Manipulation Checks. To confirm that all participants viewed the problem with the speakers as basic, the two perceived difficulty items were averaged to create a single measure ($\alpha = .89$). An ANOVA with forum level and communal norm as independent variables and revealed no main effects nor interaction (all p s > .10). Across all conditions, participants viewed the problem as fairly easy to fix ($M = 2.96$; t-test compared to the midpoint of the scale: $t(341) = -23.01, p < .01$).

A second ANOVA with perceived likelihood of getting a proper answer as the dependent variable also revealed no significant main or interaction effects (all p s > .10). All participants expected that they will get a proper answer for their question, regardless of the level of forum they viewed ($M = 7.20$; t-test compared to the midpoint of the scale: $t(341) = 29.51, p < .01$).

Willingness to Ask. Participants' willingness to ask their question was analyzed with an ANOVA with others' question level and communal norm conditions as independent variables. As in prior studies, the main effect of forum level was significant ($F(1, 336) = 47.03, p < .001$). Participants considering asking their question in a forum where others asked more difficult questions were less likely to ask for help ($M = 5.15$) than in a forum where others asked easy questions ($M = 6.86$). However, the main effect of communal norm conditions was not significant ($F(2, 336) = .14, p > .30$). The interaction term was also not significant, showing that consumers' decisions to ask their basic questions on an online forum did not depend on the levels of others' questions on

the forum and their recognition of general or specific communal norm ($F(2, 336) = .77, p > .30$). See Appendix F for the mean results.

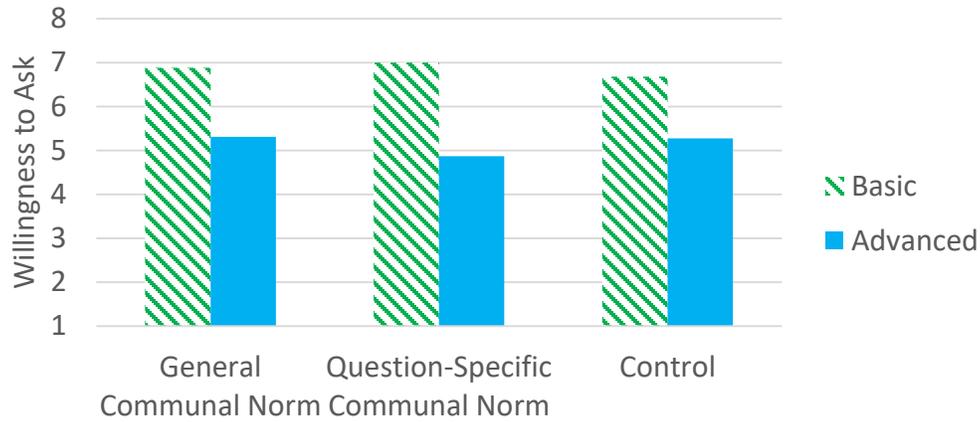


Figure 13. Willingness to Ask, Study 6 – interaction of communal norm and others’ question levels on the online product forum.

Concern for Others’ Negative Judgment. The two concern for being seen as incompetent measures were averaged to form the ‘concern for others’ negative judgment’ measure ($\alpha = .80$). An ANOVA with participants’ concern of others’ negative judgment revealed only a main effect for forum level. Participants were concerned about others’ negative judgment when others have asked more advanced questions ($M = 5.30$) than when others have asked basic questions ($M = 2.63; F(1, 336) = 100.71, p < .01$). However, the results found no main effect of communal norm ($F(2, 336) = 1.53, p > .20$). The interaction effect was also not significant ($F(2, 336) = 1.60, p > .20$). Thus, the results showed that communal norm did not reduce concern for others’ negative judgment. See Appendix E for mean results.

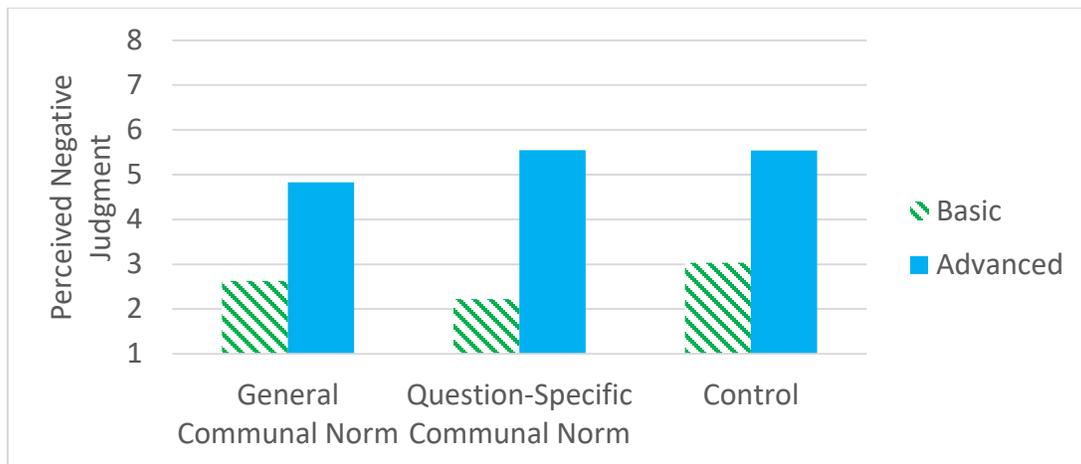


Figure 14. Anticipated Negative Judgment from Others, Study 6 – interaction of communal norm and others’ question levels on the online product forum.

Norm Awareness. An ANOVA with participants’ norm awareness revealed only a main effect for forum level. Participants were concerned about norm violation when others have asked more advanced questions ($M = 6.53$) than when others have asked basic questions ($M = 4.82$; $F(1, 336) = 66.02, p < .01$). However, the results found no main effect of communal norm ($F(2, 336) = .29, p > .30$). The interaction effect was also not significant ($F(2, 336) = 1.72, p > .10$). Thus, the results showed that communal norm did not reduce concern for norm violation. See Appendix E for mean results.

Discussion

Study 6 replicated the reluctance to ask for help when individuals with a basic level question must ask for help in an environment where others have asked more difficulty questions. Again, participants reported greater concern for being perceived as incompetent, and greater perception that they would violate a forum norm if they did ask.

However, these results were not influenced by either a general or specific communal norm. That is, despite consumers' awareness of the communal norm present in the forum, where people professed their desires to form an interdependent and cooperative community, participants still were less comfortable about asking basic questions when others have posted advanced questions on the forum.

Although a communal norm emphasizes interdependence and connection to others, one reason why this manipulation had no effect on willingness to ask for help was the norm also highlighted a need to blend in with others' behaviors. Research has shown that a communal norm not only encourages a cooperative atmosphere, but also sways individuals to make choices that match with others. For instance, individuals who hold communal mindsets tend to make the same choices as others and strive to behave similarly to them (Stephens, Fryberg, and Markus 2011; Stephens, Markus, and Townsend 2007). Moreover, the communal norm accentuates a need to cooperate with others, empathize, and be moral (Abel and Wojciszke 2007; Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick 2007). Thus, posting a question that is different from other consumers' questions may be perceived as contradicting the communal norm.

A second possibility is that the communal norm may have been perceived as an injunctive norm, rather than descriptive norm. Injunctive norms are people's perceptions of what behaviors are approved or disapproved of by others, while descriptive norms are people's perceptions of how people actually behave (Aronson, Wilson, Akert 2010). Research has shown that the descriptive norm works better for influencing behavior than injunctive norms do (Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius 2008). So potentially, had this

norm been manipulated by actual evidence of communal behavior rather than a statement of how those on the forum should behave would make it more tangible and therefore more likely to be effective.

Finally, a communal norm would suggest that a consumer might expect others who participate in the forum value offering assistance, and perceive there is some benefit in doing so. I had predicted that this expectation would diminish participants' concern for violating a competence norm and increase willingness to ask an easy question in a forum where others questions were more advanced. Perhaps this did not occur because participants do not perceive the benefit of complying with the communal norm to be valuable enough to others. The next study aims to address this by examining a context in which participants are aware that others will receive an explicit benefit for offering assistance to others.

Study 7: Explicit Incentives to Offer Assistance

If the reason why consumers do not post basic questions is due to the anticipated judgments of others, then such concern might be eliminated when the potential helpers are given incentives to answer questions. More specifically, if consumers are reluctant to ask a question because they perceive that it violates a norm and will lead others to negatively judge and potentially punish, then having an explicit mechanism by which others are rewarded for answering questions should allow a help seeker to ask a question, because they see doing so as creating an opportunity to facilitate others receiving of a benefit. Prior research which has shown that the prospect of providing help to others can

alleviate reluctance in seeking help would suggest this (Alvarez and van Leeuwen 2015). Similarly, prior work that norms may be influenced when relationship is defined as a transaction, rather than as a one-way request (Clark and Mills 1993; Marcoux 2009). Thus, in this study a reward system is introduced in which participants learn that others may gain social status when they answer questions on the forum.

Method

Participants recruited through an undergraduate subject pool at the University of Texas at Austin ($N = 214$; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.75$; 57.8% female) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. This was a 2 (Others' Questions on the Online Forum: Basic, Advanced) \times 2 (Rank Incentives, Control) between-subjects design (see Appendix G for the study materials). This study utilized a paper origami kit as in Study 3 in which participants attempted to build an origami bird, but encountered difficulty and needed to request help.

Upon starting the survey, all participants were told that the study is partnering with a company that sells origami kits. Participants were shown examples of birds that consumers could make using the kit (Appendix C). Prior to beginning the origami task, skill and interest with the craft of origami were measured with following items. Skill items: 1. "How often do you create paper origami objects? (1 = Never tried making a paper origami before, 7 = I make paper origami often)." 2. "How would you rate your skills in making paper origami objects? (1 = I'm very bad at making paper origami, 7 = I'm very good at making paper origami)" The two items were averaged to create a single measure of skill level ($\alpha = .80$). Interest items: 1. "How important is it for you to be good at making a paper origami? (1 = Not at all important, 7 = Very important)." 2. "How

valuable is it for you to be good at making a paper origami? (1 = Not at all valuable, 7 = Very valuable).” 3. “How interested are you in developing your paper origami skills? (1 = Not interested at all, 7 = Very interested)” These three items were averaged to create a single measure of interest level ($\alpha = .82$).

Next, participants were given instructions that included a list of origami symbols and told that they would be given further instructions to create an origami bird. A photograph of the finished project was included. They were also told that if they encounter trouble with the instructions, they could view an online forum dedicated to the Bird Series Origami Kit provided by the Origami Company to ask for hints regarding the bird origami that they are working on. After viewing the forum, they could decide whether they would like to ask a question or not.

Participants were then given the steps required to make the origami bird. One step was shown on the screen at a time, along with a picture of the finished bird origami product. At each step, they could advance, go back, or switch screens to consult the online forum, at will. To ensure that all of the participants would require help while working on the task, of 9 steps required in the original origami instruction, steps 2, 4, and 6 were omitted in the instruction of the present study. After viewing each step, they were given an opportunity to view the next step or view the Origami Company’s Bird Series Online Forum to ask for hints. When participants decided to view the online forum, they were first asked to describe the problem that they’d like the online forum to help them solve. Afterwards, they created an account for the website by creating an ID, and wrote the question that they wanted answered.

Participants in the Rank-Incentive condition were informed that “Often, an online forum has a rank system, which reveals the reputation of each member of the forum. In this forum, individuals can have 6 ranks: Beginner, Better than Rookie, Skilled Apprentice, Moderator, Guru, and Grand Master. In order to go up the rank, members must earn certain points. These points can be earned by posting questions and answering others’ questions. People who have asked the question can give “Kudos” to the person who provided the most helpful answer. Doing so will give the person who gave the most helpful answer twice as more points, which will allow the person to advance his or her rank faster. If you’d like to reward the person who gave the most helpful answer, you can click on the “Kudos” button to provide more points to that person.”

In the control condition, participants were only told that those on the forum could hold the rank of Beginner, Better than Rookie, Skilled Apprentice, Moderator, Guru, and Grand Master, but they were not told how those ranks were earned.

In both conditions, participants were told that “When you are able to solve your problem using one of the solutions provided by the expert, then you can indicate your question status as ‘solved’”.

When participants entered the Bird Series Origami Online Forum prepared by the Origami Company, they were able to see six questions posted by other consumers regarding some of the bird origami products (Appendix C). Along with other consumers’ questions, participants were able to see pictures of the final paper origami products that each consumer needed help with. Next to their questions and pictures of origami problems, the level of each question was presented. Depending on the condition, the

questions asked by others were either about similarly simple origami projects, or about highly complex projects. Simple and complex projects were initially selected from examples in the Guidelines for Origami Difficulty by Origami USA (<https://origamiusa.org/difficulty>). Moreover, a pretest confirmed that participants perceived the simple projects as less difficult than the complex projects.

Then, participants in all conditions were shown how their question would be publicly be displayed, so that they could check their question before making a decision to post it. The format was identical to other questions that were already posted on the online forum. Participants in the Incentive condition saw ‘Kudos’ button next to their question. Those in the control condition did not see ‘Kudos’ button.

Finally, all participants were asked if they’d like to post their question at this moment. They could either choose to post their question (“Yes, I would like to post my question on this online forum now”), or choose not to post their question (“No, I would like to try making the paper origami some more on my own before asking my question on this online forum”).

Results

The study 7 was 2 (Others’ Questions on the Online Forum: Basic, Advanced) x 2 (Incentive System, Control) between-subjects design. All participants had a basic question to ask on the forum. The main dependent variable in this study was participants’ decision to post a question on the forum.

Prior to the analysis, participants’ level of skill and interest in origami were used as dependent variables in an ANOVA with others’ question level condition (Basic,

Advanced) and rank incentive condition (Yes vs. No) as independent variables. No differences between conditions were found (all $ps > .10$).

Next, the decision to ask for help was examined. The logistic regression revealed a marginally significant main effect of the forum level ($B = -.49$, $SE = .27$, $Wald = 3.15$, $p = .07$), but no main effect of incentives ($B = .01$, $SE = .27$, $Wald = .00$, $p > .30$). Thus, the result showed that participants are less willing to ask for help in a forum where others have asked advanced questions compared (46.7%) to a forum where others have asked basic questions (34.6%). However, the chi-square test show that consumers' decisions to ask basic questions on an online forum did not depend on the level of others' questions on the forum as well as the opportunity to provide incentives to others for answering their questions ($\chi^2(3) = 3.18$, $p > .20$). Among participants in the advanced conditions, there was no difference in decision to post their basic questions on the forum. While 34.7% of the participants in the control condition decided to post their basic questions on an advanced level forum, 34.5% of the participants in the rank-incentive condition decided to do so ($p > .20$). Among participants in the basic forum conditions, there was no difference between those in the control and the rank-incentive conditions. While 46.6% of the participants in the control condition decided to post their questions on a basic forum, 46.4% of the participants in the rank-incentive condition decided to post questions on a basic forum ($p > .20$).

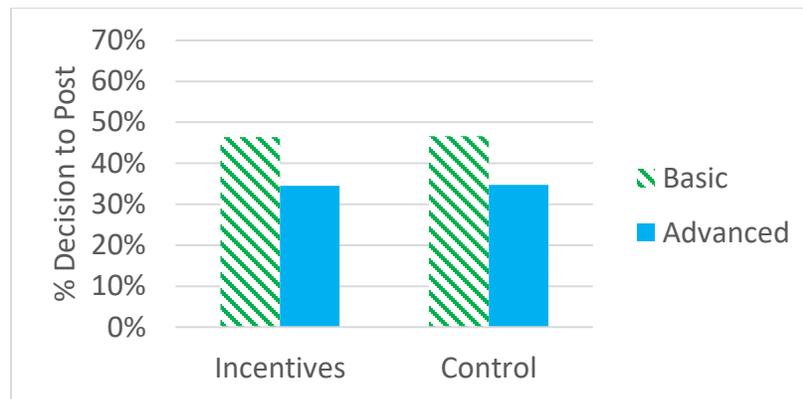


Figure 15. Decision to Post, Study 7 – interaction of incentives for the help givers and others’ question levels on the online product forum.

Discussion

Using a choice measure, study 7 again shows that participants are less willing to ask for help in a forum in which others have asked more difficult questions compared to one in which others have asked easier question. However, there was no difference in willingness to ask for help by whether or not doing so could contribute to the rank of a help provider. Next, I discuss two potential reasons why the particular incentive system manipulation did not work in this study, as well as factors to consider for future research.

Limitation due to the Targeted Salient Psychological Process. Although the incentive system was more tangible than the communal norm used in Study 6, the manipulation’s ineffectiveness may be attributed to the possibility that it did not target the most salient psychological mechanism. When consumers ask basic questions when other people are asking advanced questions, study 4 showed that participants were concerned about violating a norm of the forum and appearing incompetent. In studies 3 and 4, the public self-assessment directly addressed this specific concern by

acknowledging to others that one was aware of the violation. The manipulations in of public disclosure of alternative competence, communal norms and incentive system in studies 5, 6, and 7 did not directly address the concern about falling short of the forum standards (competence norm), but rather would have compensated for the transgression.

Potentially, decreasing the influence of norm violations requires mechanisms that directly address the norm that is violated. So, an incentive system like the one in this study may be more effective when reluctance to ask for assistance is caused by concern of burdening or creating costs for a potential help-giver (fairness norm). Prior work suggests that one may have an easier time asking for help when the cost to others is minimal, but hesitate to do so the cost increases (Shapiro 1980). If the cost is high, and consumers are concerned about this, then making the incentive system salient, such as increasing the rank of the help giver on the online forum, may diminish reluctance (Gross and Somersan 1974).

In the next study, I expand the conditions in which consumers may be reluctant to ask for help and explore to the extent to which contextual factors that may attenuate help seeking reluctance are more effective when they address the specific norm that is perceived to be violated.

Study 8: Salient Norm-Attenuating Factors

Studies 3 and 4 showed how public self-assessment can attenuate reluctance to ask for help when one's question is less advanced than others in the environment. Studies 5, 6, and 7 explored three more variables (self-affirmation, communal norm, and

incentive to others), each expected to similarly reduce reluctance to ask for help. Although in studies 5, 6, and 7 the pattern of willingness to ask for help dependent on others' questions was replicated, none of the three tested moderators had an effect. Potentially, the reason for this is that none of these variables directly addresses the norm that has been violated (having appropriate competence in the forum), and instead would merely compensate for the violation. This might suggest that any moderating variable will be more effective when it diminishes the concern for the violated norm, rather than compensating for transgression. Therefore, the goal of study 8, is to explore this by manipulating both the norm that is violated (competence vs. fairness) and the moderating factor ("help seeker self-acknowledgement" and "help provider incentive").

I posit that in the prior studies, participants inferred they would violate a competence-norm when others had more sophisticated questions. However, participants might show concern for violation of a fairness norm if they believe that potential help-givers would have to incur a significant cost in order to answer their questions. As noted above, public self-assessment was expected to allow consumers to signal their awareness of falling short of the competence standard of the forum, but this should be less effective when the concern is for fairness of the exchange. Conversely an incentive system where potential help providers receive some benefit should offset potential helpers' costs to provide help making help seeking more likely when fairness is a concern, but having less influence (as in study 7) when a competence norm is threatened. Note that if indeed this is the case, then it would both provide additional evidence that indeed self-assessment

mitigates concern for a competence norm while providing incentives mitigates concern for a fairness norm.

Method

Participants recruited through an undergraduate subject pool at the University of Texas at Austin ($N = 129$; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.50$; 63.6% female) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions (see all materials in Appendix H). This study was 2 (Salient Concern: Others' Advanced Questions, Potential Helpers' High Cost) x 2 (Norm Addressing Factor: Self-Assessment, Helper Incentives) between-subject design.

All participants were given a brief description of an online computer troubleshooting forum and were asked to think about a question that they would like to ask on an online forum. Participants then wrote their question and indicated the perceived difficulty in solving the problem. The two measures were averaged as a measure of perceived difficulty of the problem: 1. "Figuring out proper solutions to this problem would be challenging for me." 2. "I think this problem is fairly difficult" (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree).

Next, participants were directed to a computer troubleshooting online forum. Upon entering the forum, participants were given the same introduction as study 4, which indicated that all of the questions posted on the forum would be properly answered in a timely manner by computer experts. Participants were reminded that all of the questions posted on the forum can be viewed by anyone who visits the online forum (i.e. consumers of computer products, visitors browsing the website, and experts working at computer companies). Then, participants created their IDs to register for the forum.

Participants were then randomly assigned to either advanced-forum or high-cost condition. In the Advanced-Level Forum condition, participants were told that "... professional programmers are volunteering to help people solve computer issues," and they were led to an online forum where others have asked advanced questions, which were shown to be perceived as difficult in the pretest for the study. Those in the High-Cost condition were told that "... professional programmers who are volunteering to help people solve computer issues are currently under a very tight deadline on an important project. To make sure that all questions are answered in a timely manner, the programmers will immediately receive a pop-up notice whenever a new question is posted on the forum. Following the protocol, the programmers will take responsibility and answer every question when receiving the pop-up notice. It is true that answering questions will take away from their work, which means they will need to stay in the office overtime without getting paid."

Then, all participants were randomly assigned to either public Self-Assessment or Helper-Incentive condition. The self-assessment instruction was similar to that used in studies 3 and 4. Participants were told that they would rate the level of their question by answering "Compared to the questions posted on the online forum by others, how difficult is your question?" They were to choose one of the three options: "a basic question that requires beginner level computer knowledge, an intermediate question that requires average level computer knowledge, an advanced question that requires near-expert level computer knowledge." They were told that this rating of their own question would be publicly displayed next to their question. In the Helper Incentive condition,

participants were told that “the programmers will get a financial bonus at the end of each week, depending on the number of questions that they’ve answered. That is, their weekly bonus will increase if they answer more questions.”

Participants in both the Self-Assessment and Helper-Incentive conditions were shown how their question would be publicly displayed, so that they could check their question before making a decision to post their question.

Then, participants responded to the following two willingness to ask questions: 1. “I would like to participate in the above online page by asking my question.” 2. “I am willing to ask my question on the above online page (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Afterwards, participants responded to two mediational measures: 1. “Others will think that I am ignorant of the standard of this forum.” 2. “Others will think that I should not be asking my question on this forum” (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree).

To ensure that participants in the high-cost condition perceived that they were burdening the potential help givers, participants responded to two measures: 1. “I’d be concerned about interrupting the programmer’s work.” 2. “I’d be concerned about burdening the programmers if I ask my question here” (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree).

Although only those in the advanced forum condition (not those in the incentives condition) viewed others’ questions on the forum during the experiment, I showed others questions to all participants at the very end of the study to assess whether they indeed perceived others’ questions as difficult. Then I included two items: 1. “Figuring out

proper solutions to others' problem would be challenging for me." 2. "I think others' problems are fairly difficult" (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree).

Results

Manipulation Checks. To confirm that all participants viewed their own problem as basic, I computed the average of perceived difficulty of the problem measures ($\alpha = .88$). Then I conducted ANOVA with salient concern (high-cost vs. advanced-forum) and norm addressing factors (incentives vs. self-assessment) as independent variables and found no main effects ($p > .10$), but found an unexpected interaction ($F(1, 125) = 6.55, p < .03$). Among participants in the high-cost condition, those in the incentives condition perceived their problem to be easier ($M = 3.99$) than those in the self-assessment condition ($M = 5.05$). Among participants in the advanced-forum condition, those in the self-assessment condition perceived their problem to be easier ($M = 4.29$) than those in the high-cost condition ($M = 5.17$). Despite differences among conditions, participants viewed the problem as fairly easy to fix on average ($M = 4.53$).

To ensure that participants, especially those in the Advanced Forum conditions, perceived their question to be more basic than others' questions on the forum, I conducted ANOVA with salient concern and norm addressing factors as independent variables and found no main effects nor interaction effects. I found that on average, participants viewed others questions as more difficult than their question ($M = 7.83$). Also, the t-test comparing the average of perceived difficulty of their own question with the average of perceived difficulty of others' questions showed significant difference (t

(128) = -17.35, $p < .01$). Thus, participants viewed their own question as more basic than others' questions on the advanced forum.

Due to unanticipated interaction effect in perceived difficulty of their own question, I use this as a covariate in all of my analysis. However, doing so did not change the pattern of results. It is worth noting that participants' assessment of their question difficulty came before any of the manipulations in the experiment. Thus, the difference in difficulty of participants' questions is due to sampling error, and is not reflective of any systematic differences due to the experimental manipulations.

Next, I conducted a manipulation check to ensure that participants in the high-cost condition perceived that they were burdening the potential help givers more than those in the advanced-forum condition, and that providing incentives will mitigate the high-cost condition's concerns about others' burdens. So I first computed the average of the two perceived burden questions for the analysis ($\alpha = .94$). Then, I conducted ANOVA with Salient Concern and the Norm-Addressing Factors as independent variables and participants' anticipated burdening others as dependent variable. The main effect of Salient Concerns was significant ($F(1, 125) = 12.29, p < .01$), such that those in the High-Cost condition ($M = 5.14$) were more concerned about burdening the help-givers than those in the Advanced-Forum condition ($M = 3.57$). No main effect of Norm Addressing Factor was observed ($p > .10$). Moreover, the interaction term was not significant ($F(1, 125) = .66, p > .30$). The result showed that participants were indeed more concerned about burdening the help-givers when they are aware of the high-cost.

However, providing incentives did not mitigate participants' concern about burdening the givers.

Willingness to Ask. The responses to the two willingness to ask questions were averaged for the analysis ($\alpha = .82$). For the main analysis, ANOVA was conducted with Salient Concern and the Norm-Addressing Factors as independent variables and participants' willingness to ask as a dependent variable (See Figure 16). The main effect of Salient Concerns was marginally significant ($F(1, 125) = 2.97, p = .08$), such that those in the High-Cost condition ($M = 4.32$) were more willing to ask their questions than those in the Advanced-Forum condition ($M = 3.73$). No main effect of Norm Addressing Factor was observed ($p > .30$). However, as expected the interaction term was significant ($F(1, 125) = 5.11, p < .03$). Consistent with studies 3, 4, and 7, when participants considered asking their relatively easy question in a forum where others were perceived to have greater expertise, providing a public self-assessment of their own question difficulty led to greater likelihood of requesting help ($M = 4.19$) than knowing that potential helpers would be paid for their effort ($M = 3.05; F(1, 125) = -2.18, p = .03$). Conversely, when the high cost to the potential helper was made salient, the participants in the incentives condition ($M = 4.53$) were similarly willing to post their question on the forum as those in the self-assessment condition ($M = 4.00, F(1, 125) = 1.01, p = .31$).

The interaction result remained the same when I included the perceived difficulty of one's question as a covariate in the analysis ($F(1, 124) = 8.05, p < .01$).

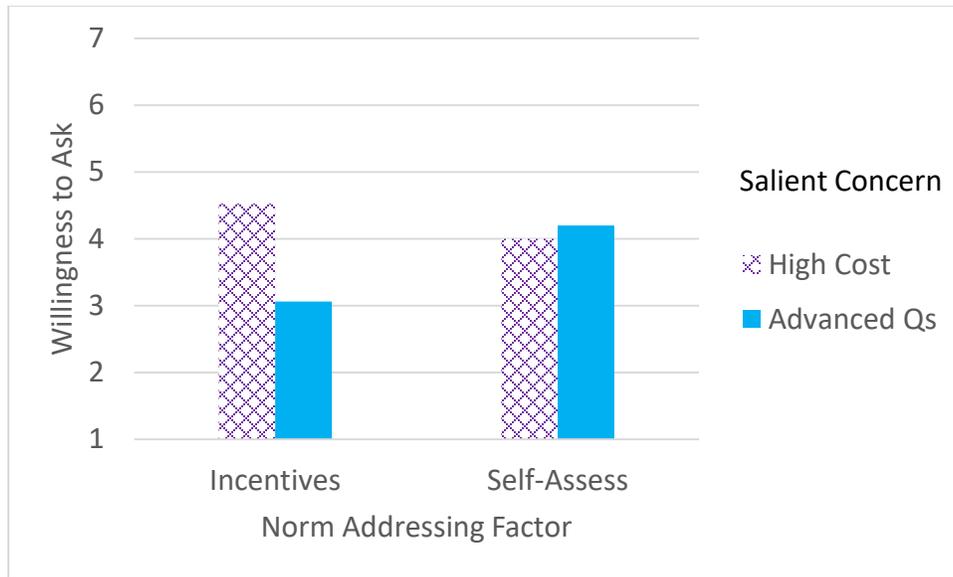


Figure 16. Willingness to Ask, Study 8 – interaction of salient concern and norm-addressing factor.

Anticipated Negative Judgments of Others. The responses to these two anticipated negative judgments questions were averaged for the analysis ($\alpha = .87$). A second ANOVA was run with the anticipated negative judgments of others as a dependent variable. The main effect of Salient Concerns was significant ($F(1, 125) = 14.68, p < .01$), such that those in the High-Cost condition ($M = 4.01$) anticipated less negative judgments from others than those in the Advanced-Forum condition ($M = 5.46$). The main effect of Norm-Addressing Factors was marginally significant ($F(1, 125) = 3.49, p = .06$), such that those in the Incentives condition ($M = 4.96$) anticipated slightly more negative judgments from others than those in the Self-Assessment condition ($M = 4.50$).

However, as in the willingness to ask for help measure, there was a significant interaction ($F(1, 125) = 5.52, p = .02$). In the Advanced-Forum condition, those who publicly offered a self-assessment of their question difficulty anticipated significantly less

negative judgment ($M = 4.75$) than those in the Helper-Incentive condition ($M = 6.50$; $F(1, 125) = 2.97, p = .003$). In the High-Cost condition, there was no significant difference between those who provided a Self-Assessment ($M = 4.13$) and when the helper would receive an Incentives ($M = 3.94$) ($F(1, 125) = -.34, p = .73$). The result remained the same when I included the perceived difficulty of one's question as a covariate in the analysis ($F(1, 124) = 4.99, p < .03$).

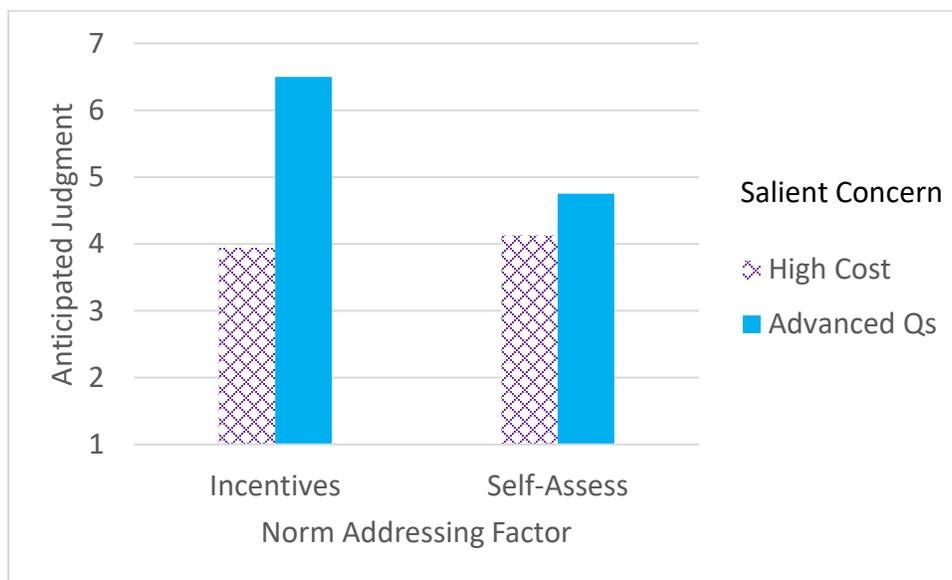


Figure 17. Anticipated Negative Judgment from Others, Study 8 – interaction of salient concern and norm-addressing factor.

Mediational Analysis. Next, I examined whether the anticipated negative judgments from others mediated the impact of the salient concern (high-cost of the helper vs. advanced questions of others) and the Norm Addressing Factor (incentives vs. self-assessment) on willingness to ask a question on a forum. Using the recommended technique for testing conditional indirect effects (Hayes 2013), process analysis (model 8) confirmed evidence of mediation. The interactive effect of the salient concern and the

moderators on willingness to ask was mediated by consumers' anticipated negative judgment of others (Figure 13). I tested this using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro with 5,000 bootstrapped samples. The indirect effect was $\beta = 0.5116$ ($SE = .2806$), with a 95% bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence interval (CI) that excluded zero (95% CI [.0905, 1.2096]). This finding provides evidence that the mediational path predicting willingness to ask from the salient concern and the moderators is conditioned on the anticipated negative judgments of others.

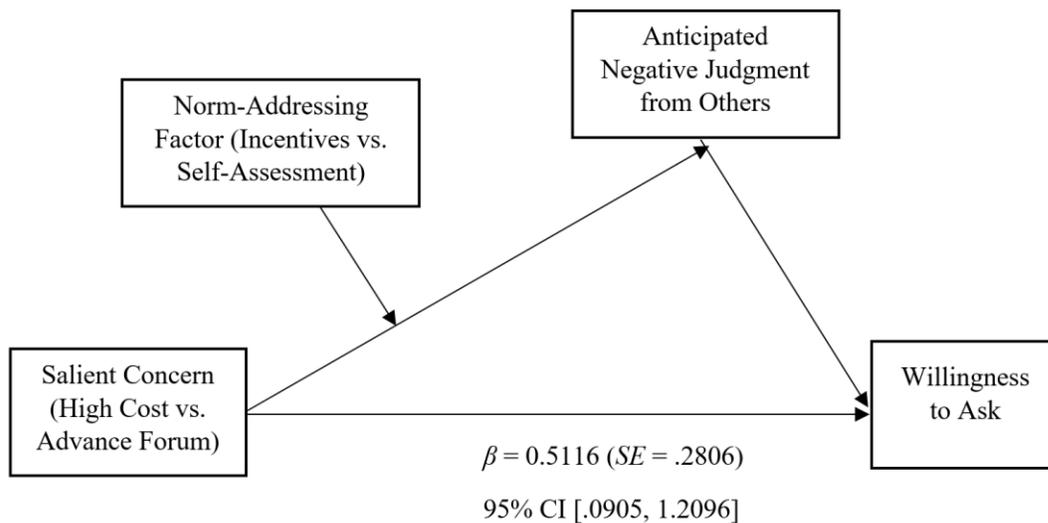


Figure 18. Mediation Analysis, Study 8 – anticipated negative judgment from others mediates the interactive effect of salient concerns and norm-addressing factors on participants' willingness to ask basic question on the online product forum.

Discussion

The main purpose of study 8 was to show that each norm-addressing factor targets specific concerns, which decides its effectiveness in facilitating consumers' help-seeking

decisions. Indeed, I found that when there is a concern for the norm of competence (advanced forum condition), self-assessment is more important than incentives to increase willingness to ask. That is, when consumers were concerned about falling short of the standard set by other consumers' advanced questions on the forum, participants anticipated less negative judgments from others after publicly self-assessing their question, compared to providing incentives for others. This, in turn, made consumers to be more willing to ask their questions on the advanced forum after self-assessing their question, compared to providing incentives condition. However, when consumers were concerned about falling short of the standard set by other consumers' advanced questions on the forum, providing incentives to the help-seekers did not reduce anticipated negative judgments from others, which made them unwilling to ask their question on the forum.

When there is a concern for the norm of fairness (high cost condition), participants in both self-assessment and incentives conditions did not anticipate negative judgments from others, which made them more willing to ask their questions on the forum. This does not mean that the high-cost manipulation was ineffective, because the manipulation check showed that participants in the high cost condition did express more concern about burdening the givers than those in the advanced forum condition. Thus, even when participants in the high cost condition were concerned about burdening the givers, they did not anticipate others to judge them negatively. This may be due to participants' perception that answering questions on the forum is part of the programmers' job description. Research has shown that individuals seek help easily when they think helping is part of the potential help-giver's job description (Hofmann,

Morgeson, and Gerras 2003; Morrison 1994). This may be the reason why participants in the high cost condition did not anticipate negative judgments from others, allowing them to be more willing to ask their questions on the forum.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

A substantial amount of literature on online marketing has explored consumers' motivations for involvement as well as the nature of online forums. However, little prior work has explored the critical determinant of activity on online forums: the decision to post questions on the forum. Consumers visit the forum to seek help to resolve issues that arise while using the products because an online forum is one of the most accessible ways to find help. Yet, if they decide not to post their questions, then they will likely delay the time it takes to receive proper help in resolving their problem. In turn, this could cause prolonged frustrations and dissatisfaction with the product.

This research demonstrates that the decision to post a question on an online forum can be influenced by the perceived social norm established by preexisting questions that peer consumers have posted on the forum. I especially focus on contexts where consumers could feel embarrassed to expose their incompetence in front of knowledgeable others. In eight studies, I show that consumers are reluctant to ask basic questions if they see that others are posting sophisticated questions. They feel embarrassed in anticipation of others' negative judgment for falling short of the standard of the forum (studies 1 and 2). I then show that by providing an opportunity for consumers to publicly acknowledge their question as basic, their concerns regarding

others' negative judgments can be alleviated by communicating to others their understanding of the forum's standards (studies 3 and 4). I argue that anticipated negative judgments of others stem from consumers' failure to meet the expectation set by the forum's norm. Studies 5, 6, and 7 examine how other factors (self-affirmation, communal norms, and incentive mechanisms) associated with increased likelihood of help-seeking are less likely to be effective when competence-norm violations are of concern. The last study, Study 8, offers further support for this by showing that each factor targets a specific concern, which decides its effectiveness in facilitating consumers' help-seeking decisions. The effects hold across a couple of product categories (e.g. electronics and creative skills), scenarios in which participants describe actual problems they are having with real products, and lab studies in which participants require help following assembly instructions. Below, I offer a discussion that describes theoretical as well as managerial contributions of this research and avenues for future work.

Theoretical Contribution

My findings make several theoretical contributions. First, I break new ground in the help-seeking literature by investigating the influence of other help-seekers on the target consumer's willingness to seek help. Prior work has focused on either the help giver's characteristics, the target help-seeker's characteristics, or the help-seeking context. Unlike traditional help-seeking contexts, consumers who are seeking help via online forums are seeking help not only in the presence of other help-seekers, but also with information (i.e. perceived norm) retrieved from other help-seekers' questions. The scant amount of literature that examines the influence of other help-seekers only studied

situations where individuals are seeking the same type of help as peer help-seekers (i.e. asking questions about the same types of math problems given by an instructor; Dweck 1986; Tessler and Schwartz, 1972). Yet, the type of help that individuals seek on online product troubleshooting forums may vastly differ from what other help-seekers are asking, even when they are referring to the same product. Since most online forums are completely transparent and visible to the public, consumers can also readily view the details of others' questions. During this process, the present research demonstrates that they will perceive a social norm enforced by peer help-seeking consumers on these forums and therefore be reluctant to post a question that does not meet the perceived norm. Thus, the present study evidences how the perceived norm of the forum set by other consumers' questions influences the potential help-seeker's decision to seek help on online forums.

Second, I bring together literature on the self-presentation motivations and the social influences in help-seeking behaviors in online community forums. I show that consumers' desire to maintain a positive self-image is an important factor that determines their willingness to seek help, even in an online setting. While posting questions on an online forum could help consumers to solve the encountered problem with the product, it also exposes the fact that they could not figure out the given problem on their own. Because consumers need to publicly spell out the specific problem they need help with, they must expose their lack of knowledge regarding the issue. Thus, such threat to their competence could be exacerbated when consumers perceive that their questions are more basic compared to others. Because humans have basic needs for competence and

autonomy (Ryan and Deci 1985, Ryan 1982), behaviors that can be interpreted as threats to such needs are likely to be avoided. Likewise, I find that consumers' anticipated negative judgments of others, as well as the feelings of embarrassment that stem from it, prevent consumers from asking questions on an online forum.

Third, I introduce a few simple techniques that marketers could use to mitigate anticipated negative judgments of others and increase help-seeking behaviors on online forums: publicly self-assessing their questions before posting, incorporating members' achievements in profiles, using the forum's mission statements to promote a communal norm, and changing incentive systems for the forum participants. After discussing ways to implement each tactic, I discuss how different tactics target specific concerns. For instance, I show that providing a way for consumers to publicly self-assess their own questions can mitigate their reluctance in seeking help when falling short of the competence norm. In addition, I show that providing a way for consumers to provide incentives for potential help-givers can mitigate their reluctance to burden the givers.

Future Directions

The present research demonstrates that public self-assessment can increase a consumer's likelihood of asking his or her question on a forum when the primary concern involves competence norm (studies 3, 4, and 8). Further research is needed to understand the extent of public self-assessment's effectiveness in facilitating help-seeking behavior despite norm violations. Whether public self-assessment would work for any kind of norm violation, or the existence of boundary conditions for its effectiveness, is an empirical question. Among the moderators examined in the present research (i.e. self-

affirmation, communal norm, and forum incentive system), public self-assessment was found to be the most effective in warding off the competence norm. While the present research attempted to investigate how incentives for help-givers could ward off the fairness norm in relation to high cost incurred by help-givers, it is unclear whether it would be effective in mitigating other concerns related to fairness norm, such as potential cost incurred by other help-seekers, culpability of need, and reciprocity. Moreover, researchers would benefit from gaining a greater understanding as to whether public self-assessment would similarly be effective in mitigating other types of norms, such as relational norms.

Future research could also explore instances when the self-affirmation and communal norms could facilitate consumer help-seeking behaviors. Studies 5 and 6 showed that self-affirmation and a communal norm may not be effective in warding off consumers' concerns regarding falling short of expectations. Yet, self-affirmation may be effective in warding off personal or non-social costs in seeking help, such as threat to freedom and evaluation of self. Self-affirmation is known to be effective in increasing one's perceived psychological resources (Sherman 2013). Consequently, self-affirmation may decrease anticipated time and effort necessary to find possible resources for help. Enforced communal norm of the forum may be effective in warding off social costs related to status concerns. Research has shown that communal norm increases cooperation and trust among the members of the community (Aggarwal 2004). Likewise, communal norm of the forum could decrease consumers' evaluation concerns when seeking help from the boss or the subordinate.

Moreover, future research could examine other factors that reduce consumers' concerns regarding interpersonal embarrassment when posting questions on the forum. The present research examined instances when the question poser is aware of other consumers' knowledgeability, signaled by the kinds of questions that others have asked on the forum. Some forums only reveal the first few words of questions posed by consumers on the forum. Even on those forums, the rank of the question posters is often fully revealed. These ranks often symbolize approximate relative experience, knowledge, and frequency of contribution of members within the online community. Consumers can gauge others' knowledgeability regarding the product by looking at their rank. While some online forums have more identifiable rank systems (such as Levels 1-10), other forums have more obscure rank systems. For instance, Lenovo.com ranks consumers in the following manner: What's DOS, Paper Tape, Serial Port, Fanfold Paper, Punch Card, Token Ring, 802.11n, and Blue Screen Again. Such a ranking system does not make clear the knowledgeability of the poster. Future research could examine whether more obscure rank systems allow consumers to be less sensitive to interpersonal embarrassment when posting questions on forums.

Going beyond the one-time effect of forum content and design on consumers' help-seeking decisions, future research could explore the longitudinal effects. Even when consumers decide to post their questions on their first visit, they may not come back to the same forum when they have another question to ask in the future. Existing literature has focused on analyzing existing online communities to extract factors that hold them together (Armstrong and Hagel 1996; Teichmann, et al. 2015). A lot of these factors

depend on consumers' needs, which are often beyond the firm's control. Yet, the specific feature of the online forum could influence consumers' desire to come back to the forum repeatedly, such as the composition of peer help-seeking consumers, the forum's aesthetic layout, and the type of viral content within the forum. Thus, further empirical work is needed to understand how the content and design of the forum influence member retention and growth in the forum.

Lastly, research could also examine how the types of help services affect consumers' decisions to ask for help. To understand how online forums compare to other types of help services, I conducted a pretest. When consumers need post-purchase help with a product, they consider several options: searching for information via Google, visiting an online forum, asking a friend for help, calling customer service to get help from an expert, or making an appointment with an expert for in-person help. Compared to asking someone for in-person help, individuals considered visiting an online forum as more of a way to receive help while exercising autonomy. Consumers who are searching for help via online forums have the desire to fix the encountered problem on their own. They are mainly looking for proper information that will help them to solve the problem through their own effort. Such a help-seeking tendency is called autonomy-oriented help-seeking, as opposed to dependency-oriented help-seeking (Nadler and Halabi, 2006). Thus, respecting consumers' desire for autonomy could be especially important when providing help via an online forum, compared to other available help services. By investigating how consumers perceive and utilize different types of help services, marketers could make more informed decisions when designing online forums.

Practical Implication

Most corporations moderate the online forum activities, and I show that they should be aware of the levels of questions that are being posted on the forum. Consumers' reluctance to ask novice questions compared to those previously posted by others on the forum may be particularly problematic in sustaining the activity of the forum. As an online forum matures, it will gain a greater number of members who are fairly knowledgeable about the product category. Compared to these knowledgeable members, consumers who are new to the forum are likely to be novice users with more basic questions to ask. When such novice users visit the forum to ask a question, they are more likely to get accurate answers on forums where more advanced users ask and answer questions. However, when these new users see that other members have posted more difficult questions than the questions that they have, they may become reluctant to post their questions due to anticipated negative judgment from other users who seem more knowledgeable. In order to sustain the activity of the forum, first time users must stay engaged in the forum community. Therefore, marketers must be sensitive to issues that users face when they arrive in the online forum to ask a question that they have, such as having a question more basic than the questions that are already posted on the forum.

To monitor the difficulty of questions posted on the forum, marketers could get insights from Bloom's Taxonomy. Bloom's Taxonomy was originally developed to identify educational goals in six categories: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom, et al. 1956). According to a pretest that I conducted, participants evaluated basic questions in either knowledge or comprehension

categories, intermediate questions in application and analysis categories, and sophisticated questions in synthesis and evaluation categories ($p < .05$). Likewise, marketers could use Bloom's Taxonomy or develop unique ways to measure the level of each question posted on the online forum to facilitate help seeking behaviors.

The present research evidenced that a simple manipulation of the online forum designs could increase consumers' likelihood of asking their questions on the forum. Although consumers feel reluctant to ask their basic questions on an online forum where others have posted sophisticated questions, I find that such reluctance can be mitigated by providing consumers an opportunity to publicly assess the level of their own questions. I show that marketers could mitigate consumers' reluctance in asking a potentially norm-violating question by giving them an opportunity to publicly express their awareness of the norm. When consumers are concerned about the high cost that potential providers face in providing help, securing incentives for help-givers could mitigate such concern and facilitate consumer help-seeking decisions on the forum. The findings of this study show that the contents and design of the online community forum can influence consumers' willingness to post their questions. By being sensitive to the types of concerns that consumers have when posting questions on a forum, marketers could design online forums to facilitate consumers' online help-seeking decisions.

Appendix A: Essay 2, Study 1

Study 1. Average Willingness to Ask

	Mean
Others' Advanced Questions	3.79 (sd = 2.39)
Others' Basic Questions	5.63 (sd = 1.60)

Study 1. Parameter Estimates

	B (SE)	t-value	Significance
Others' Advanced Questions	1.03 (se = .22)	4.69	.00
Others' Basic Questions	5.63 (sd = 1.60)	-1.51	.14

Study 1. Forum Introduction.

Thank you for participating in this study.

We are interested in learning about **people's experiences and opinions in resolving various issues while using a computer.**

While using a computer, people experience various problems or issues.

In the box provided below, **write a problem that you have recently encountered while using your computer, which you'd like to get an answer for.** Please write your problem in a **question format.**

Example: I tried to play a song on my laptop, but could not hear any sound coming out from my speaker. What can I do to resolve this issue?

Computer Issue

While there are many ways to seek help to solve the problems you encounter while using a computer, one way to do so is by asking your question on an online forum.

An **online forum** is an internet discussion site where people can hold conversations in the form of posted messages.

It provides an online exchange of information between people about a particular topic. It provides a venue for questions and answers.

You will soon be given an opportunity to view an online forum, where other consumers have asked questions regarding computer issues.

This forum is supported by a computer company, where each consumer can ask questions publicly.

Next, you will be directed to an online forum.

Please wait a few seconds while the online forum loads on the screen.



Welcome to a computer troubleshooting forum!

This online forum provides a space for consumers to ask questions regarding problems that they have encountered while using a computer product.

Consumers log on to this public forum to ask questions to **professional computer experts who work at computer companies.**

While consumers could have varying levels of knowledge in computer troubleshooting, **professional experts** have lots of experience and knowledge in this area.

These experts ensure that all of the questions on the forum will be **properly answered in a timely manner**, regardless of the levels of knowledge that consumers visiting the website possess.

Note that this is a form where **consumers ask questions publicly.**

Questions posted on this forum can be **viewed by anyone who visits this online forum** (i.e. consumers of computer products, visitors browsing the website, and experts working at computer companies).

On the next screen, you will see questions that several other members of your forum have already posted. Next to their names and their questions, you will notice each of their "levels," which refers to their knowledge about computers.

Level 1 indicates a person who asks **easy questions**, which indicates that he or she has a **beginner level computer knowledge**.

Level 5 indicates a person who asks **intermediate level questions**, which indicates that he or she has an **average level computer knowledge**.

Level 9 indicates a person who asks **difficult questions**, which indicates that he or she has a **near-expert level computer knowledge**.

Study 1. Advanced Forum Stimuli.

Frequently Asked Questions: Public Page

ID	QUESTIONS	LEVEL	STATUS
JaneLY	Q: What should be the reference noise level at which graphics cards should be tested? 35 dB, 40dB, 45 dB, 50 dB, or 55 dB?	Level 8	
MarkPZ	Q: I upgraded my drives from EIDE to ATAPI. How do I check the backwards-compatibility of my drives?	Level 9	
GraceAI	Q: When examining Core i3, i5, i7, Celeron N2807, and AMD APU E-12500 processors, which purpose does each serve the best?	Level 8	
DerekYE	Q: Which motherboard would be best for multimedia? Can the i7 4790k use 2133 DDR3 ram?	Level 8	
StevenBE	Q: How can I restore a failed computer BIOS upgrade after setting up an Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line?	Level 9	

Study 1. Basic Forum Stimuli

Frequently Asked Questions: Public Page

ID	QUESTIONS	LEVEL	STATUS
JaneLY	Q: What safety precautions should I follow when using my computer?	Level 1	
MarkPZ	Q: How can I check the warranty status of my machine?	Level 2	
GraceAI	Q: Where are the installation discs for preinstalled software?	Level 1	
DerekYE	Q: How do I stop viruses?	Level 1	
StevenBE	Q: Where can I download drivers and software for my machine?	Level 2	

Appendix B: Essay 2, Study 2

Study 2. Willingness to Ask.

	My Advanced Question	My Basic Question
Others' Advanced Questions	4.64 (sd = 2.10)	3.28 (sd = 2.07)
Others' Basic Questions	3.80 (sd = 2.00)	4.30 (sd = 2.06)

Study 2. Anticipated Embarrassment.

	My Advanced Question	My Basic Question
Others' Advanced Questions	1.62 (sd = 1.26)	3.65 (sd = 2.04)
Others' Basic Questions	2.02 (sd = 1.67)	2.98 (sd = 1.99)

Study 2. Choice of Advanced Questions for Participants to Ask on the Forum.

Your Questions

QUESTIONS
Q: When examining Core i3, i5, i7, Celeron N2807, and AMD APU E-12500 processors, which purpose does each serve the best?
Q: What is the BIOS setup utility?
Q: Can the i7 4790k use 2133 DDR3 ram?
Q: Which computer's graphic card would be best for running photo/video editing software?
Q: When and how do I need to change the boot mode?

Study 2. Choices of Basic Questions for Participants to Ask on the Forum

Your Questions

QUESTIONS
Q: How do I contact customer support?
Q: What is the difference between a MAC and a PC?
Q: What is the difference between a hard drive and RAM?
Q: What do I do when no sound can be heard from my speaker even when powered on?
Q: Where can I find the hardware specifications for my computer?

Study 2. Other Consumers' Advanced Questions on the Forum.

Online Forum Page

LEVEL	ID	QUESTIONS
Level 9	JaneLY	Q: What should be the reference noise level at which graphics cards should be tested? 35 dB, 40dB, 45 dB, 50 dB, or 55 dB?
Level 8	MarkPZ	Q: How can I start the BIOS setup utility?
Level 8	GraceAI	Q: Where can I find listings of current and withdrawn system machine type models and specifications?
Level 8	DerekYE	Q: Which motherboard would be best for multimedia?
Level 9	StevenBE	Q: How important is GPU memory bandwidth?

Study 2. Other Consumers' Basic Questions on the Forum.

Online Forum Page

LEVEL	ID	QUESTIONS
Level 1	JaneLY	Q: What safety precautions should I follow when using my computer?
Level 2	MarkPZ	Q: How can I check the warranty status of my machine?
Level 1	GraceAI	Q: Where are the installation discs for preinstalled software?
Level 1	DerekYE	Q: Where can I download drivers and software for my machine?
Level 2	StevenBE	Q: How do I stop viruses?

Appendix C. Essay 2, Study 3

Study 3. Percentage of Participants Who Decided to Ask Their Basic Question.

	Self-Assessment	Control
Others' Advanced Questions	42.2 % (19 out of 45)	17.1 % (7 out of 41)
Others' Basic Questions	26.8 % (11 out of 41)	40.0 % (18 out of 45)

Study 3. Origami Instruction

Today, you will be making a **basic level origami bird**. The origami bird instructions will start on the next screen.

If you have trouble figuring out the origami instructions, then you can **view an online forum provided by the Origami Company** to ask for hints regarding the bird origami that you are working on.

This online forum is dedicated to the Bird Series Origami Kit developed by the Origami Company. After viewing the forum, you can decide whether you'd like to ask a question on the Bird Series Origami forum.

Do NOT start the origami task yet.

Below is the final picture of the bird origami that you will make today.

This is a basic level origami, which requires a **beginner level origami knowledge**.

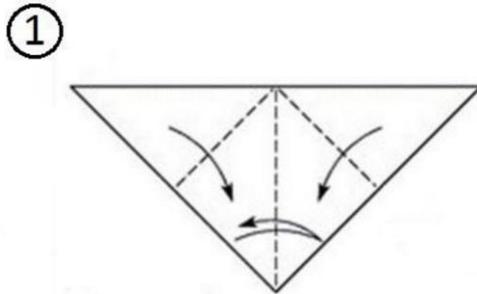


Take a piece of blue paper in front of you (behind your laptop).

Click the next button to start the simple bird origami task.

Please follow the instruction below to make the simple origami bird.

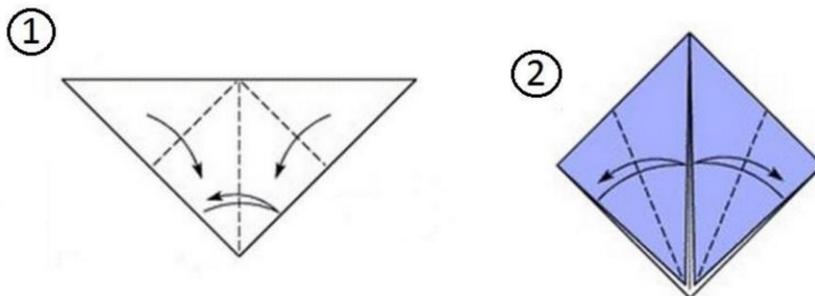
When you have trouble figuring out the step, click the "View the Origami Forum" button to view the **origami forum** to ask question on the forum. You can always come back to this page to continue with the origami task after viewing the forum.



- [View Next Step.](#)
- [View the Origami Company's Bird Series Online Forum to ask for hints.](#)

Please follow the instruction below to make the simple origami bird.

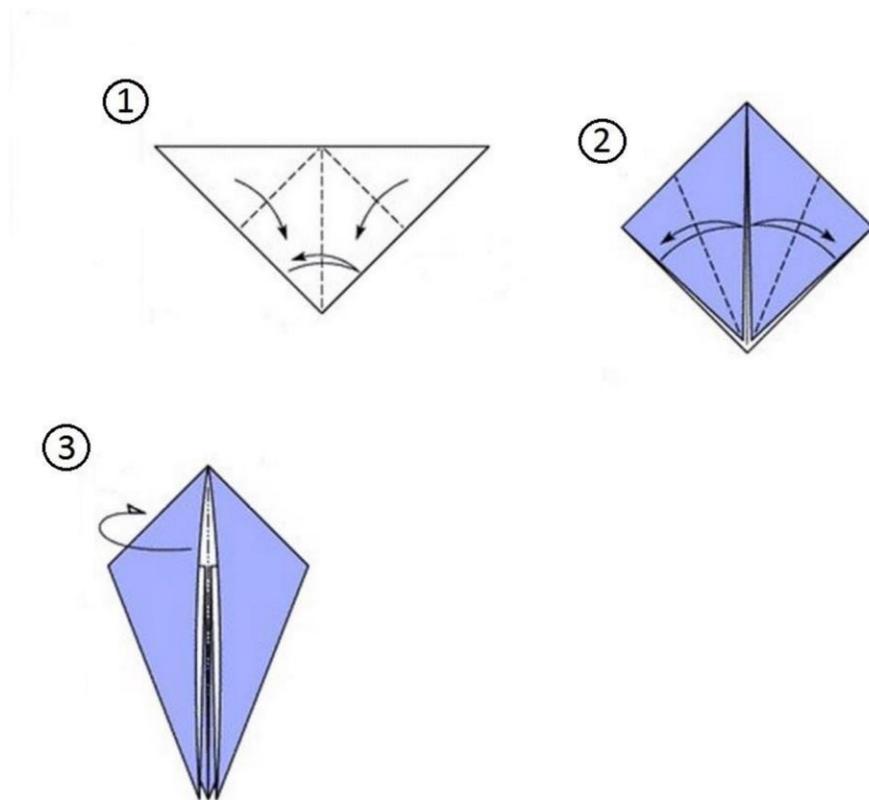
When you have trouble figuring out the step, click the "View Online Forum" button to view the **origami forum** to ask question on the forum. You can always come back to this page to continue with the origami task after viewing the forum.



- [View Next Step.](#)
- [View the Origami Company's Bird Series Online Forum to ask for hints.](#)

Please follow the instruction below to make the simple origami bird.

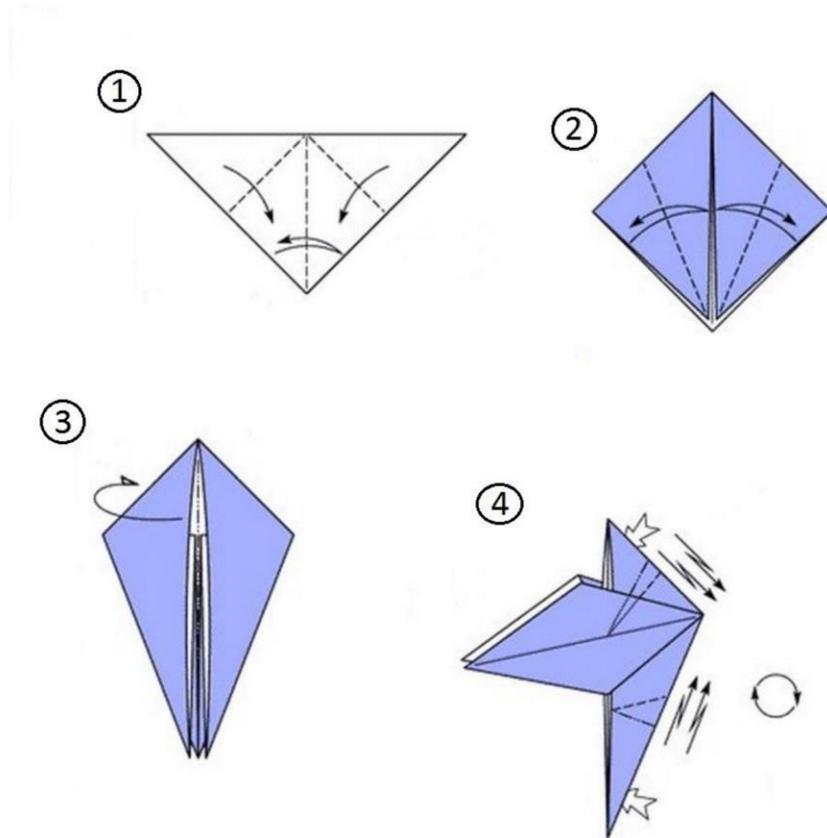
When you have trouble figuring out the step, click the "View Online Forum" button to view the **origami forum** to ask question on the forum. You can always come back to this page to continue with the origami task after viewing the forum.



- [View Next Step.](#)
- [View the Origami Company's Bird Series Online Forum to ask for hints.](#)

Please follow the instruction below to make the simple origami bird.

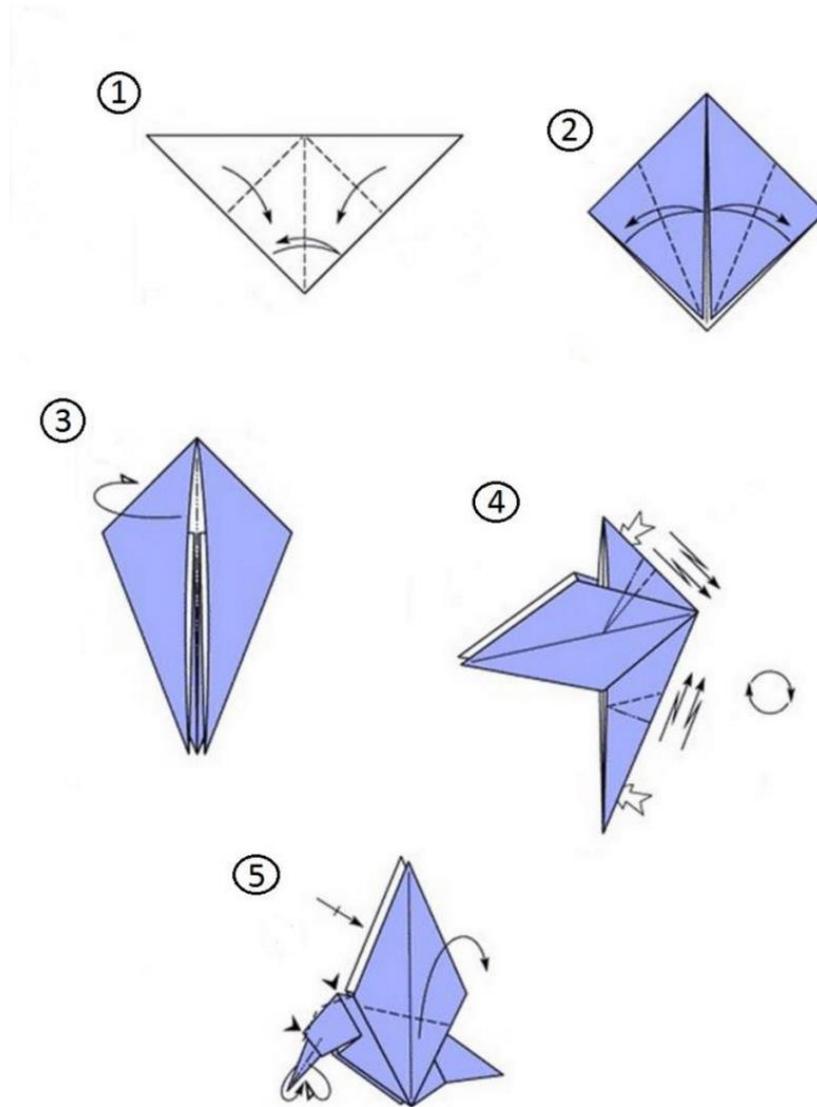
When you have trouble figuring out the step, click the "View Online Forum" button to view the **origami forum** to ask question on the forum. You can always come back to this page to continue with the origami task after viewing the forum.



- [View Next Step.](#)
- [View the Origami Company's Bird Series Online Forum to ask for hints.](#)

Please follow the instruction below to make the simple origami bird.

When you have trouble figuring out the step, click the "View Online Forum" button to view the **origami forum** to ask question on the forum. You can always come back to this page to continue with the origami task after viewing the forum.



- [View Next Step.](#)
- [View the Origami Company's Bird Series Online Forum to ask for hints.](#)

You can first view an online forum and decide whether you'd like to ask your question there or not.

Click on the button below to enter the online computer forum.



Loading

Welcome to an Origami forum!

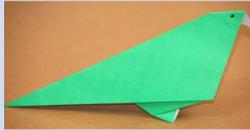
This online forum provides a space for consumers to ask questions about the bird origami instructions.

Questions posted on this forum can be **viewed and answered by anyone who visits this forum** (i.e. **consumers of Origami USA products and visitors browsing the website**).

To ensure that all of the questions are properly answered in a timely manner, **origami experts who are working at this company will also view and answer questions**.



Study 3. A Forum Where Other Consumers Have Asked Questions Regarding Basic Level Problems:

ID	QUESTIONS	LEVEL	STATUS
JaneLY	<p>Q: How to make a double fold for the legs?</p> 	Level 1	
MarkPZ	<p>Q: Paper creasing complication in creating the wings?</p> 	Level 2	
GraceAI	<p>Q: Valley folding the flap upwards to make a tail?</p> 	Level 2	
DerekKL	<p>Q: Wing fold complications in flying swan?</p> 	Level 1	
SusanCH	<p>Q: How do I separate out the tail feathers?</p> 	Level 3	
StevenGI	<p>Q: Need help in creating eyes, cheeks, and beaks?</p> 	Level 2	

Study 3. A Forum Where Other Consumers Have Asked Questions Regarding Advanced Level Problems:

ID	QUESTIONS	LEVEL	STATUS
JanelY	<p>Q: How to make a double fold for the legs?</p> 	Level 7	
MarkPZ	<p>Q: Paper creasing complication in creating the wings?</p> 	Level 8	
GraceAI	<p>Q: Valley folding the flap upwards to make a tail?</p> 	Level 8	
DerekKL	<p>Q: Wing fold complications in flying swan?</p> 	Level 7	
SusanCH	<p>Q: How do I separate out the tail feathers?</p> 	Level 9	
StevenGI	<p>Q: Need help in creating eyes, cheeks, and beaks?</p> 	Level 8	

Study 3. Stimuli for Self-Assessment Condition.

PUBLIC-ASSESSMENT OF YOUR QUESTION

When you post a question on this forum, **people who are viewing your question** (other consumers who visit the forum as well as computer experts) will **rate the level of your question**. These levels will range from Level 1 to Level 9.

Level 1 indicates an **easy question**, which requires a beginner level computer knowledge. **Level 5** indicates an **intermediate question**, which requires an average level computer knowledge. **Level 9** indicates a **difficult question**, which requires a near-expert level computer knowledge.

The **ratings will be publicly displayed** next to your question.

The ratings will be **publicly displayed** next to your question.

When you are able to solve your problem using one of the solutions provided by the expert, then you can indicate your question status as 

Before asking your question, you will be able to see questions that several other members of your forum have already posted. Please read each question carefully to see if anyone else has asked the same question that you are about to ask on the forum.

When you view others' questions, you will be able to see the **ratings that people have given to their own questions**.

If the question was properly answered, then you will see  marked next to the question.

SELF-ASSESSMENT OF YOUR QUESTION

Before you pose your question on the online forum, we'd like to ask for you to identify the **difficulty of your question**. Your assessment of your question will be **linked** to your question on the website. Everyone who views your question will be able to **view** your assessment.

If **Level 1** indicates **easy questions (beginner level computer knowledge)**, **Level 5** indicates **intermediate level questions (average level computer knowledge)**, and **Level 9** indicates **difficult questions (near-expert level computer knowledge)**,

Which level would your audio problem question be?

Level 1 Level 2 Level 3 Level 4 Level 5 Level 6 Level 7 Level 8 Level 9

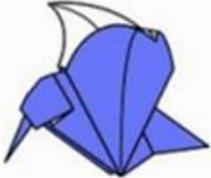
Your question will be publicly displayed as below. Be sure to check your question.

ID	QUESTION	LEVEL	STATUS
<p>\$(q://QID225/ChoiceTextEntryValue)</p>	<p>I know that this is \$(q://QID245/ChoiceGroup/SelectedChoices), but \$(q://QID249/ChoiceTextEntryValue)</p> 	<p>\$(q://QID246/ChoiceGroup/SelectedChoices)</p>	

As you will see on the subsequent pages, your assessment of your question will be shown to everyone who views your question.

Study 3. Stimuli for Control Condition.

Your question will be publicly displayed as below. Be sure to check your question.

ID	QUESTION	LEVEL	STATUS
<p>\$(q://QID225/ChoiceTextEntryValue)</p>	<p>\$(q://QID249/ChoiceTextEntryValue)</p> 		

Appendix D. Essay 2, Study 4

Study 4. Willingness to Ask.

	Self-Assessment	Other-Assessment	Control
Others' Advanced Questions	6.74 (sd = 2.18)	5.46 (sd = 2.77)	5.26 (sd = 2.80)
Others' Basic Questions	7.23 (sd = 1.70)	7.42 (sd = 1.85)	7.32 (sd = 1.85)

Study 4. Awareness of the Forum's Norm.

	Self-Assessment	Other-Assessment	Control
Others' Advanced Questions	7.34 (sd = 1.68)	5.78 (sd = 2.03)	6.09 (sd = 1.85)
Others' Basic Questions	6.50 (sd = 1.41)	5.96 (sd = 1.58)	6.52 (sd = 1.53)

Study 4. Stimuli.

Hi,

Thank you for participating in this study.

We are interested in learning about people's experiences and opinions
in resolving various issues while using a computer.

While using a computer, you've likely experienced various problems or issues.

Imagine you tried to play a song on your computer and realized that you could not hear any sound
from your speaker even when powered on.

While there are many ways to seek help regarding the problem with your speaker,
one way to do so is by asking your question on an online forum.

An **online forum** is an internet discussion site where people can hold conversations in the form of
posted messages.

It provides an online exchange of information between people about a particular topic. It
provides a venue for questions and answers.

A discussion forum can contain a number of subforums, each of which may have several topics.

Within a forum's topic, each new discussion started is called a thread, and can be replied to by as many people as so wish.

To solve the encountered problem, imagine that you wanted to ask the following question on the online forum.

"I cannot hear any sound from my speaker even when powered on. What are some things I could check for?"

Next, you will be directed to an online forum.

Please wait a few seconds while the online forum loads on the screen.



Welcome to a computer troubleshooting forum!

This online forum provides a space for consumers to ask questions regarding problems that they have encountered while using a computer product.

Consumers log on to this public forum to ask questions to **professional computer experts who work at computer companies.**

While consumers could have varying levels of knowledge in computer troubleshooting, **professional experts** have lots of experience and knowledge in this area.

These experts ensure that all of the questions on the forum will be **properly answered in a timely manner**, regardless of the levels of knowledge that consumers visiting the website possess.

Note that this is a form where **consumers ask questions publicly.**

Questions posted on this forum can be **viewed by anyone who visits this online forum** (i.e. consumers of computer products, visitors browsing the website, and experts working at computer companies).

Study 4. Others' Basic Questions on the Forum Stimuli.

Frequently Asked Questions: Public Page

ID	QUESTIONS	LEVEL	STATUS
JaneLY	Q: What safety precautions should I follow when using my computer?	Level 1	
MarkPZ	Q: How can I check the warranty status of my machine?	Level 2	
GraceAI	Q: Where are the installation discs for preinstalled software?	Level 1	
DerekYE	Q: How do I stop viruses?	Level 1	
StevenBE	Q: Where can I download drivers and software for my machine?	Level 2	

Study 4. Others' Advanced Questions on the Forum Stimuli.

Frequently Asked Questions: Public Page

ID	QUESTIONS	LEVEL	STATUS
JaneLY	Q: What should be the reference noise level at which graphics cards should be tested? 35 dB, 40dB, 45 dB, 50 dB, or 55 dB?	Level 8	
MarkPZ	Q: I upgraded my drives from EIDE to ATAPI. How do I check the backwards-compatibility of my drives?	Level 9	
GraceAI	Q: When examining Core i3, i5, i7, Celeron N2807, and AMD APU E-12500 processors, which purpose does each serve the best?	Level 8	
DerekYE	Q: Which motherboard would be best for multimedia? Can the i7 4790k use 2133 DDR3 ram?	Level 8	
StevenBE	Q: How can I restore a failed computer BIOS upgrade after setting up an Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line?	Level 9	

Study 4. Intro Stimuli for Both Self-Assessment and Other-Assessment Conditions.

PUBLIC-ASSESSMENT OF YOUR QUESTION

When you post a question on this forum, **people who are viewing your question** (other consumers who visit the forum as well as computer experts) will **rate the level of your question**. These levels will range from Level 1 to Level 9.

Level 1 indicates an **easy question**, which requires a beginner level computer knowledge. **Level 5** indicates an **intermediate question**, which requires an average level computer knowledge. **Level 9** indicates a **difficult question**, which requires a near-expert level computer knowledge.

The **ratings will be publicly displayed** next to your question.

The ratings will be **publicly displayed** next to your question.

When you are able to solve your problem using one of the solutions provided by the expert, then you can indicate your question status as 

Study 4. Other-Assessment Condition Stimuli.

Before asking your question, you will be able to see questions that several other members of your forum have already posted. Please read each question carefully to see if anyone else has asked the same question that you are about to ask on the forum.

When you view others' questions, you will be able to see the **ratings that other visitors of this online forum has given to each question**.

If the question was properly answered, then you will see  marked next to the question.

Your question will be publicly displayed as below. Be sure to check your question.

ID	QUESTION	LEVEL	STATUS
<p><code>#{q://QID812/ChoiceTextEntryValue}</code></p>	<p>I cannot hear any sound from my speaker even when powered on. What are some things I could check for?</p>	<p>*Other visitors, members, and computer experts who view your question will decide the level of your question*</p>	

As you can see above, the level of your question will be decided by others who view your question.

Study 4. Self-Assessment Condition Stimuli.

Before asking your question, you will be able to see questions that several other members of your forum have already posted. Please read each question carefully to see if anyone else has asked the same question that you are about to ask on the forum.

When you view others' questions, you will be able to see the **ratings that people have given to their own questions**.

If the question was properly answered, then you will see  marked next to the question.

SELF-ASSESSMENT OF YOUR QUESTION

Before you pose your question on the online forum, we'd like to ask for you to identify the difficulty of your question. Your assessment of your question will be **linked** to your question on the website. Everyone who views your question will be able to **view** your assessment.

SELF-ASSESSMENT OF YOUR QUESTION

Note: **Your assessment** of your question (your responses to the three questions below) will be **publicly shown** to everyone who views your question.

"I cannot hear any sound from my speaker even when powered on. What are some things I could check for?"

Compared to the questions posted on the online forum by others, how difficult is your question regarding an audio problem?

- an easy question that requires beginner level computer knowledge
- an intermediate question that requires average level computer knowledge
- a difficult question that requires near-expert level computer knowledge

If **Level 1** indicates **easy questions (beginner level computer knowledge)**, **Level 5** indicates **intermediate level questions (average level computer knowledge)**, and **Level 9** indicates **difficult questions (near-expert level computer knowledge)**,

Which level would your audio problem question be?

- Level 1 Level 2 Level 3 Level 4 Level 5 Level 6 Level 7 Level 8 Level 9
-

Your question will be publicly displayed as below. Be sure to check your question.

ID	QUESTION	LEVEL	STATUS
<code>#{q://QID812/ChoiceTextEntryValue}</code>	I know that this is <code>#{q://QID806/ChoiceGroup/SelectedChoices}</code> , but I cannot hear any sound from my speaker even when powered on. What are some things I could check for?	<code>#{q://QID681/ChoiceGroup/SelectedChoices}</code>	

As you will see on the subsequent pages, your assessment of your question will be shown to everyone who views your question.

Appendix E. Essay 2, Study 5

Study 5. Willingness to Ask.

	Achievement	Interest	Control
Others' Advanced Questions	5.04 (sd = 2.28)	4.60 (sd = 2.48)	5.27 (sd = 2.54)
Others' Basic Questions	6.42 (sd = 2.09)	7.02 (sd = 2.06)	6.83 (sd = 2.15)

Study 5. Concern for Incompetence.

	Achievement	Interest	Control
Others' Advanced Questions	5.53 (sd = 2.25)	5.20 (sd = 2.79)	5.43 (sd = 2.68)
Others' Basic Questions	3.51 (sd = 2.29)	3.34 (sd = 2.35)	3.13 (sd = 2.35)

Study 5. Awareness of the Forum's Norm.

	Achievement	Interest	Control
Others' Advanced Questions	6.32 (sd = 1.93)	6.50 (sd = 2.16)	6.61 (sd = 1.80)
Others' Basic Questions	5.48 (sd = 2.19)	5.32 (sd = 2.15)	5.04 (sd = 2.16)

Study 5. Anticipated Embarrassment.

	Achievement	Interest	Control
Others' Advanced Questions	4.45 (sd = 2.24)	4.14 (sd = 2.76)	4.32 (sd = 2.53)
Others' Basic Questions	2.88 (sd = 1.96)	2.65 (sd = 2.08)	2.60 (sd = 2.13)

Study 5. Forum Introduction Stimuli

Welcome to a computer troubleshooting forum!

This online forum provides a space for consumers to ask questions regarding problems that they have encountered while using a computer product.

Consumers log on to this public forum to ask questions to **professional computer experts who work at computer companies.**

While consumers could have varying levels of knowledge in computer troubleshooting, **professional experts** have lots of experience and knowledge in this area.

These experts ensure that all of the questions on the forum will be **properly answered**, regardless of the levels of knowledge that consumers visiting the website possess.

Note that this is a form where consumers ask questions publicly.

Questions posted on this forum can be **viewed** **by anyone who visits this online forum** (i.e. consumers of computer products, visitors browsing the website, and experts working at computer companies).

Study 5. Achievement Condition Stimuli.

Shortly, we are going to give you the opportunity to pose your question on the discussion forum. Before you pose your question, we'd like to ask that you introduce yourself to other members of this forum.

Please think about **one of the skills that you are very proud of**. That is, share **one of your great achievements** (apart from computers).

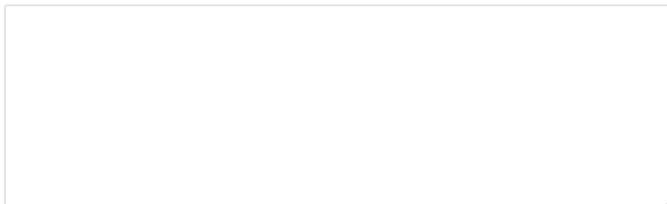
Something that you are not only interested and competent in, but also made a lot of **achievements that others also clearly recognize**.

For instance, you may be a great swimmer, a biker, a chef, a quilt-maker, or a musician.

In 5 - 7 sentences, describe your competence and achievements in this particular thing (in a **non-technology** domain).

What kind of **achievements** and **recognitions** have you made? Why is it **important** to you? Be as specific and descriptive as you can.

Note: This introduction about yourself will be shown to other people on this forum. Please do **not** write anything related to computer or technology domain.



Study 5. Interest Condition Stimuli.

Shortly, we are going to give you the opportunity to pose your question on the discussion forum. Before you pose your question, we'd like to ask that you introduce yourself to other members of this forum.

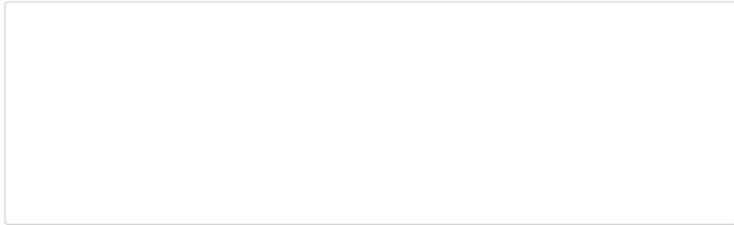
Just to get the others on the forum to get to know you better, we would like for you to highlight **another interest you might have (apart from computers)** -- something at which you believe that you are good at.

For instance, you may be a swimmer, a biker, a chef, a quilt-maker, or a musician (just for fun).

In **5 - 7 sentences**, describe your interest in a **non-technology** domain.

How did you develop such interest? Why is it important to you?
Be as specific and descriptive as you can.

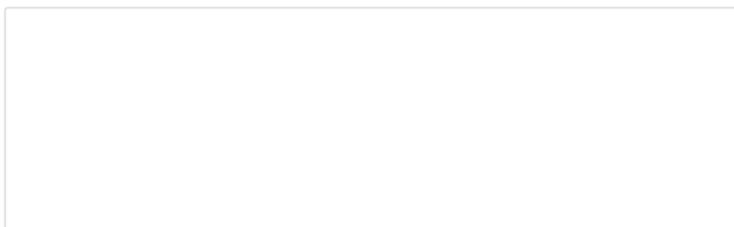
Note: This introduction about yourself will be shown to other people on this forum. Please do **not** write anything related to computer or technology domain.



Study 5. Control Condition Stimuli.

Before asking the questions on this public forum page, please briefly say hello to other members of this forum.

Note: This greeting will be shown to other people on this forum.



Appendix F. Essay 2, Study 6

Study 6. Willingness to Ask.

	General Communal Norm	Question-Specific Communal Norm	Control
Others' Advanced Questions	5.31 (sd = 2.64)	4.87 (sd = 2.51)	5.27 (sd = 2.67)
Others' Basic Questions	6.88 (sd = 1.72)	7.00 (sd = 2.10)	6.68 (sd = 1.96)

Study 6. Concern for Incompetence.

	General Communal Norm	Question-Specific Communal Norm	Control
Others' Advanced Questions	4.83 (sd = 3.05)	5.55 (sd = 2.94)	5.54 (sd = 2.64)
Others' Basic Questions	2.63 (sd = 1.79)	2.22 (sd = 1.76)	3.03 (sd = 2.23)

Study 6. Awareness of the Forum's Norm.

	General Communal Norm	Question-Specific Communal Norm	Control
Others' Advanced Questions	6.65 (sd = 1.99)	6.57 (sd = 1.96)	6.37 (sd = 1.87)
Others' Basic Questions	4.55 (sd = 1.99)	4.68 (sd = 2.07)	5.19 (sd = 1.83)

Study 6. General Communal Norm Stimuli.

Shortly, we are going to give you the opportunity to pose your question on the discussion forum. Before you pose your question, we'd like to ask you to indicate how you share the mission of this online forum community.

This online community firmly believes in forming an interpersonal community by helping each other solve computer-related problems.

To do so, we encourage you to think of what makes you belong and connected with your closest friends and family. What makes you an integral part of your immediate environment?

Write a short essay (about 6 - 7 sentences) on what this belonging means to you. Provide an example. Be as specific and descriptive as you can.

As you write below, try to think about how this online community could foster such connection.

Note: This introduction about yourself will be shown to other people on this forum.

Study 6. Question-Specific Communal Norm Stimuli.

Shortly, we are going to give you the opportunity to pose your question on the discussion forum. Before you pose your question, we'd like to ask you to indicate how you share the mission of this online forum community.

This online community firmly believes in helping each other solve computer-related problems.

There are two ways you can help each other on this online forum.

First, you are welcome to **answer** any of the questions that others posted on the forum.

Second, you can **ask** questions that you have, so that others can answer your questions.

How much do you share this belief of the online community?

While providing help by answering questions may sound obvious, this online community strongly advocates **providing help by asking questions**. Other people are likely to have similar questions as you, so your question can help other visitors of this forum who are experiencing similar problems as you.

In about 6 - 7 sentences, please indicate how you aspire to help others in the online community by both asking your question and answering others' questions. In particular, focus on the importance of asking your question to help other visitors of this online forum. We encourage you to include your hopes and desires for forming an interpersonal community here.

Note: This introduction about yourself will be shown to other people on this forum.

Study 6. Control Stimuli.

Before asking the questions on this public forum page, please briefly say hello to other members of this forum.

Note: This greeting will be shown to other people on this forum.

Appendix G. Essay 2, Study 7

Study 7. Willingness to Ask.

	Incentives	Control
Others' Advanced Questions	34.5% (19 out of 55)	34.7% (17 out of 49)
Others' Basic Questions	46.4% (26 out of 56)	46.6% (27 out of 58)

Study 7. Control Condition Stimuli.

RANK OF THE FORUM PARTICIPANTS

Often, an online forum has a rank system that reveals the reputation of the person asking the question.

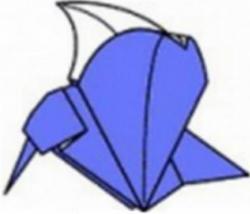
In this forum, individuals can earn **6 ranks**:

Beginner, Better than Rookie, Skilled Apprentice, Moderator, Guru, and Grand Master.

When you are able to solve your problem using one of the solutions provided by the expert, then you can indicate your question status as 

Your question will be publicly displayed as below. Be sure to check your question.

As you can see, other people can click the "Answer" button to answer your question.

ID	QUESTION	ACTION	STATUS
	<p><code>#{q://QID249/ChoiceTextEntryValue}</code></p> 		

Would you like to ask your question on this forum now?

- Yes, I would like to ask my question on this online forum now.
- No, I would not like to ask my question on this online forum now. I will work on my origami some more on my own.

Study 7. Incentives Condition Stimuli.

RANK OF THE FORUM PARTICIPANTS

Often, an online forum has a rank system that reveals the reputation of the person asking the question.

In this forum, individuals can earn **6 ranks**:

Beginner, Better than Rookie, Skilled Apprentice, Moderator, Guru, and Grand Master.

**In order to go up the rank, members must earn certain points.
These points can be earned by posting questions and answering others' questions.**

Moreover, people who have asked the question can give "Kudos" to the person who provided the most helpful answer.



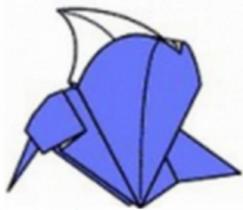
Doing so will give the person who gave the most helpful answer twice as more points, which will allow the person to advance his or her rank faster.

When you are able to solve your problem using one of the solutions provided by the expert, then you can indicate your question status as 

If you'd like to reward the person who gave the most helpful answer, you can click on the  button to provide more points to that person.

Your question will be publicly displayed as below. Be sure to check your question.

As you can see, other people can click the "Answer" button to answer your question, and **you can provide "Kudos" to other people's answers to give them more points to help others move up the rank for giving you a helpful answer.**

ID	QUESTION	ACTION	STATUS
	<p data-bbox="337 548 740 579"><code>#{q://QID249/ChoiceTextEntryValue}</code></p> 	<p data-bbox="813 674 938 726">Answer</p> <p data-bbox="797 751 954 793">KUDOS</p>	

Would you like to ask your question on this online forum now?

- Yes, I would like to ask my question on this online forum now.
- No, I would not like to ask my question on this online forum now. I will work on my origami some more on my own.

Appendix H. Essay 2, Study 8

Study 8. Willingness to Ask.

	Incentives	Self-Assessment
Help-Giver's High Cost	4.53 (sd = 2.15)	4.00 (sd = 2.30)
Others' Advanced Questions	3.06 (sd = 1.79)	4.20 (sd = 1.94)

Study 8. Anticipated Negative Judgments of Others.

	Incentives	Self-Assessment
Help-Giver's High Cost	3.94 (sd = 2.07)	4.13 (sd = 2.23)
Others' Advanced Questions	6.50 (sd = 2.19)	4.75 (sd = 2.65)

Study 8. Perceived Difficulty of Others' Questions.

	Incentives	Self-Assessment
High Cost	7.94 (sd = 1.55)	7.73 (sd = 1.73)
Advanced Forum	7.98 (sd = 2.01)	7.67 (sd = 1.98)

Study 8. Perceived Help-Giver's Burden.

	Incentives	Self-Assessment
High Cost	5.04 (sd = 2.58)	5.31 (sd = 2.97)
Advanced Forum	2.94 (sd = 2.58)	4.00 (sd = 2.70)

Study 8. High Cost Condition Stimuli.

Welcome to the computer online forum!

This is a place where you can **ask questions to professional programmers** who are volunteering to help people solve computer issues.

Just letting you know, our programmers are currently under a very tight deadline on an important project. To make sure that all questions are answered in a timely manner, our programmers will immediately receive a pop-up notice whenever a new question is posted on this forum.

Following the protocol, the programmers will take responsibility and answer every question when receiving the pop-up notice. It is true that answering questions will take time away from their work, which means they will need to stay in the office overtime without getting paid.

Study 8. Advanced Forum Condition Stimuli.

Welcome to the computer online forum!

This is a place where you can **ask questions to professional programmers** who are volunteering to help people solve computer issues.

Frequently Asked Questions: Public Page

ID	QUESTIONS	LEVEL	STATUS
JanelY	Q: What should be the reference noise level at which graphics cards should be tested? 35 dB, 40dB, 45 dB, 50 dB, or 55 dB?	Level 8	
MarkPZ	Q: I upgraded my drives from EIDE to ATAPI. How do I check the backwards-compatibility of my drives?	Level 9	
GraceAI	Q: When examining Core i3, i5, i7, Celeron N2807, and AMD APU E-12500 processors, which purpose does each serve the best?	Level 8	
DerekYE	Q: Which motherboard would be best for multimedia? Can the i7 4790k use 2133 DDR3 ram?	Level 8	
StevenBE	Q: How can I restore a failed computer BIOS upgrade after setting up an Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line?	Level 9	

Study 8. Incentives Condition Stimuli.

One thing to note: The programmers will get financial bonus at the end of each week, depending on the number of questions that they've answered. That is, their weekly bonus will increase if they answer more questions!

Your question will be publicly displayed as below. Be sure to check your question.

ID	QUESTION	LEVEL	STATUS
\${q://QID573/ChoiceTextEntryValue}	\${q://QID479/ChoiceTextEntryValue/1}?		

Study 8. Self-Assessment Condition Stimuli

SELF-ASSESSMENT OF YOUR QUESTION

When you post a question on this forum, **you will rate the level of your question**. The levels will range from Level 1 to Level 9.

Level 1 indicates an **easy question**, which requires a beginner level computer knowledge. **Level 5** indicates an **intermediate question**, which requires an average level computer knowledge. **Level 9** indicates a **difficult question**, which requires a near-expert level computer knowledge.

Your ratings will be publicly displayed next to your question. Thus, everyone who views your question will be able to **view** your assessment.

Your ratings will be **publicly displayed** next to your question. Thus, everyone who views your question will be able to **view** your assessment.

When you solved your problem using one of the solutions provided by the expert, then you can indicate your question status as 

SELF-ASSESSMENT OF YOUR QUESTION

Note: **Your assessment** of your question (your responses to the three questions below) will be **publicly shown** to everyone who views your question.

"\${q://QID479/ChoiceTextEntryValue/1}"

How difficult is your question?

- an easy question that requires beginner level computer knowledge
- an intermediate question that requires average level computer knowledge
- a difficult question that requires near-expert level computer knowledge

If **Level 1** indicates **easy questions (beginner level computer knowledge)**,
Level 5 indicates **intermediate level questions (average level computer knowledge)**,
and **Level 9** indicates **difficult questions (near-expert level computer knowledge)**,

Which level would your question be?

Level 1 Level 2 Level 3 Level 4 Level 5 Level 6 Level 7 Level 8 Level 9

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

Your question will be publicly displayed as below. Be sure to check your question.

ID	QUESTION	LEVEL	STATUS
\${q://QID573/ChoiceTextEntryValue}	I know that this is \${q://QID547/ChoiceGroup/SelectedChoices} , but \${q://QID479/ChoiceTextEntryValue/1} ?	\${q://QID548/ChoiceGroup/SelectedChoices}	

Your assessment of your question will be shown to everyone who views your question.

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