

Promoting proactive helping behaviour: the role of positive psychological capital and emotional self-control

Estelle van Tonder

Department of Marketing and Retail Management, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Daniel J. Petzer

Henley Business School Africa, University of Reading, Johannesburg, South Africa and Department of Marketing Management, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa, and

Sam Fullerton

Business School, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa and Department of Marketing, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan, USA

Abstract

Purpose – Customers' proactive helping behaviours involving personal initiative taking may present an effective solution for assisting other customers in avoiding harmful brands. Accordingly, this study aims to propose a model explaining the role of positive psychological capital (self-efficacy and optimism) in influencing customers' proactive helping behaviours involving personal initiative taking. The study additionally provides greater clarity regarding the moderating effect of emotional self-control within the suggested model.

Design/methodology/approach – Survey data were collected from 256 respondents in South Africa, who reported on their perceptions and the degree to which they engage in proactive helping behaviours to assist other customers in avoiding harmful brands. Hypotheses were tested using regression analysis.

Findings – General self-efficacy and social optimism influence customers' proactive helping behaviours. Emotional self-control moderates the indirect effect of general self-efficacy on customers' proactive helping behaviours through social optimism.

Research limitations/implications – Greater insight is obtained into the interplay between factors representing a positive psychological state and self-control of negative emotions and these factors' effect on customers' proactive helping behaviours involving personal initiative taking.

Originality/value – The research extends knowledge of proactive helping behaviours involving personal initiative taking to assist other customers in avoiding harmful brands and subsequently provides a baseline for further research in this regards. Practically, the research is useful to social agents of society concerned with promoting responsible purchasing practices.

Keywords Emotional intelligence, Extra-role behaviours, Helping, Personal initiative, Positive psychological capital, Self-efficacy

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Extant research offers comprehensive insight into customers' motivations for avoiding harmful brands (Alyahya *et al.*, 2023; Delistavrou *et al.*, 2020; Shin and Yoon, 2018), but is not yet clear on what measures to employ to secure proactive assistance for customers needing further guidance on their brand selections. Earlier studies have identified factors, such as social norms, attitudes and perceived behavioural control, in a supermarket setting (Delistavrou *et al.*, 2020), judgement of boycott effectiveness (Shin and Yoon, 2018) and businesses' true ethical intentions (moral values) for launching reactive versus proactive eco-innovations (Alyahya *et al.*, 2023) to be relevant in influencing

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customers' boycott behaviours. However, it seems that these factors may not always successfully translate into the desired brand avoidance behaviours. Customers are often confronted with large volumes of brands from a variety of competitors, especially in supermarket stores, and tend to fall back on product attributes, including salient and easy-to-evaluate product characteristics, when having to make product decisions. Moreover, customers may focus less on ethical strengths in their product evaluations, with the assessment of products' moral values being more complicated (Alyahya *et al.*, 2023; Delistavrou *et al.*, 2020; Schamp *et al.*, 2019). Given these perspectives, a broadened understanding is needed of the proactive assistance that could be provided to customers to further help them in avoiding harmful brand purchases and the factors that may influence these proactive behaviours.

Subsequently, of special interest to the current investigation is the important role customers could perform in proactively assisting fellow customers with their purchase decisions. Customers may act proactively and engage in various initiatives to assist other customers in addressing setbacks they may experience (McGrath and Otnes, 1995). These proactive approaches in surmounting obstacles are fundamentally reflective of personal initiative taking (Frese and Fay, 2001), a behavioural phenomenon that was initially conceptualised as a form of employee behaviour within organisational literature (Frese and Fay, 2001), but has also been acknowledged in other disciplines demonstrating, for example, behavioural responses of students (Liando and Lumettu, 2017) and entrepreneurs (Nsereko *et al.*, 2018). Personal initiative addresses the behaviour an individual engages in that is "self-starting" and characterised by taking a "proactive" approach to surmount obstacles in achieving goals (Frese and Fay, 2001). Hence, personal initiative concerns acting proactively (without being given instructions) to address identified problems that may prevent or stand in the way of one achieving stated goals (e.g. making responsible purchase decisions). McGrath and Otnes (1995) referred to customers' personal initiative taking actions as a manifestation of proactive helping behaviour. These proactive helping behaviours involving personal initiative taking may serve as an efficient solution to guide fellow customers in need of further assistance to avoid harmful brands. Amid the plethora of available brands in the market, customers with knowledge about ethical brands could provide valuable direction when they act proactively and engage in helping initiatives to actively support fellow customers in addressing setbacks and doubts they may experience and to avoid brands that may be harmful to society. However, more research is needed to advance understanding of this construct that has received relatively limited attention in marketing literature to date. Earlier contributions of proactive helping behaviours are largely confined to aspects including the identification and description of the proactive helper role (McGrath and Otnes, 1995; Parker and Ward, 2000), its influence on customer satisfaction (Wu, 2008) and the relevance of personality type in acting as a proactive helper (Zourrig and Chebat, 2009). There still seems to be paucity of research on the application of proactive helping behaviour in relation to responsible purchasing practices and what factors may motivate customers to proactively assist other customers in avoiding harmful brands.

To this end, the aim of the current investigation is to develop and test a research model that provides insight into a novel set of factors contributing to proactive helping behaviour involving personal initiative taking to assist other customers in avoiding harmful brands. The investigation was guided by positive psychological capital (Luthans *et al.*, 2004), the cognitive "architecture" of personality (Cervone, 2004) and emotional intelligence theory (Goleman, 1996). Several studies indicate positive psychological capital's great potential to influence personal initiative types of behaviours. Positive psychological capital relates to the "positive state of mind" (Sun *et al.*, 2021) of individuals, such as customers (Alotaibi *et al.*, 2023), which is reflected by perceptions like self-efficacy (a belief in one's own abilities) and optimism (individual appraisals and an optimistic outlook) (Ergün and Avci, 2018; Muncy and Iyer, 2020; Newman *et al.*, 2014). Based on the broaden-and-build theory of positivity (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001, 2003), the positive sentiments (as manifested by self-efficacy and optimism) may engender "broader ways of thinking and behaving" that could lead to individuals reaching out to others and, for example, providing recommendations for improving things (Avey *et al.*, 2008, p. 50; Avey *et al.*, 2011, p. 133; Fredrickson, 2003; Norman *et al.*, 2010, p. 383). Aligned to these perspectives, self-efficacy has been associated with willingness to share knowledge (Shahzadi *et al.*, 2015), whereas other scholars also allude to a positive relationship between self-efficacy perceptions and problem-solving efforts and a lack of spontaneous efforts in the event of self-doubt (Bandura, 1982; Kim and Glassman, 2013). In addition, optimists are more inclined than pessimists to engage in problem-solving efforts (Chang, 1996). Optimistic individuals may perceive themselves as performing a role in facilitating movement or change, and thus may engage in initiative behaviours (Erez *et al.*, 2001).

Furthermore, the related discipline of psychology has found that individuals' positive psychological state of optimism is preceded by their perceptions of self-efficacy levels (Karademas, 2006; Pu *et al.*, 2017). The occurrence can be explained by the cognitive "architecture" of personality (Cervone, 2004), denoting that knowledge structures influence appraisal processes and subsequent behavioural responses (Karademas, 2006; Pu *et al.*, 2017). Accordingly, similar effects may be plausible in the consumer environment, addressing human behaviours. Customers' knowledge about their own abilities, such as perceptions of self-efficacy in advising others, could positively influence their appraisals and optimistic outlooks to solving problems, which may lead to behavioural responses, including personal initiative taking. However, this process may be further affected by customers' ability to control negative and disruptive emotions experienced when assisting other customers. According to emotional intelligence theory, individuals who are caught up with negative emotions may not be able to sufficiently digest information or deal with it effectively and may be unable to pay attention to other matters (Goleman, 1996). Self-regulation is important, as it may aid in bouncing back from psychological distress and allows individuals to more swiftly resume a positive psychological state following feelings of distress. The skill to control emotions is useful in behavioural adjustment and lowers the likelihood of anti-social behaviours (Bouckennooghe *et al.*, 2014). Hence, it is plausible that customers' ability to control their negative emotions (emotional self-control) could influence their

positive psychological states, which may further affect their social behaviours, such as personal initiative taking (Goleman, 1998).

Given these perspectives, several hypotheses were formulated to examine the degree to which positive psychological capital (self-efficacy and optimism) may influence customers' proactive helping behaviours involving personal initiative taking as well as the potential moderating role of emotional self-control within the suggested model. The study surveyed customers in South Africa who generally advise other customers about ethical consumption practices. Direct, indirect and moderated effects were assessed with the aid of regression analysis.

Theoretically, this study provides insight into a novel set of factors contributing to proactive helping behaviour involving personal initiative taking to assist other customers in avoiding harmful brands. In addition, the assessment of the moderating effect of emotional self-control provides greater insight into the interplay between customers' positive psychological state of mind and their self-control of negative emotions, as well as the possible resulting effect this may have on their proactive helping behaviours. Practically, the study explains the strategies that may be deployed to promote the desired proactive helping behaviours that could aid in facilitating more responsible purchasing practices.

Theoretical framework

Customer helping behaviour

Customer helping is generally perceived as a form of customer citizenship behaviour (Yi and Gong, 2013). Customer citizenship behaviours concern the voluntary assistance ("extra role") types of behaviours of customers that extend beyond the traditional business–customer transactional relationship and include the assistance customers provide to other customers in the consumer marketplace (Bove *et al.*, 2009; Choi and Lotz, 2016; Yi and Gong, 2013). Customers can provide a broad range of voluntary assistance to other customers in the marketplace, including guidance in decision-making (Van Tonder *et al.*, 2023), providing verification of the decision process, assessing product options and selecting purchases (Price *et al.*, 1995). Customers may help other customers within online brand communities (Zhu *et al.*, 2016) or offline at home, work or within stores (McGrath and Otnes, 1995; Van Tonder *et al.*, 2023) and may even step up in the event of service failures to support other customers (Ho *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, as addressed earlier, the current research was interested in the proactive help customers provide to other customers, involving initiative taking, which may occur within any social setting.

Proactive helping involving personal initiative taking

Proactive helping tends to be unsolicited and directly contrasts with reactive helping that is only provided when fellow customers seek guidance from other customers. With proactive helping, customers take a self-starting approach to assist other customers, without being asked to interfere (McGrath and Otnes, 1995; Parker and Ward, 2000). In general, proactive helping involves taking personal initiative to assist other customers in addressing setbacks they may experience in the consumer marketplace (McGrath and Otnes, 1995).

Personal initiative concerns a "self-starting" or "proactive" approach to surmount obstacles in achieving goals (Frese and Fay, 2001). Being self-starting means that individuals do not take

a backseat while waiting for others to act, but instead take action without instruction from others or without modelling behaviour on someone else (Frese *et al.*, 2016). The active nature of this approach can result in a change in the environment and opposes a passive approach, where no initiative is taken at all (Frese and Fay, 2001). Therefore, personal initiative "represents a construct of proactive self-regulation" and "refers explicitly and exclusively to behavior that can be categorized as *self-starting* and *proactive*" (Warner *et al.*, 2017, p. 114). In the context of the current investigation and the work of Solesvik (2017, p. 225), personal initiative in this study relates to getting actively involved, taking initiatives immediately, making rapid use of opportunities and doing more than being asked to help others avoid brands that may be harmful to society.

As positioned earlier, positive psychological capital and emotional self-control have a high likelihood of influencing proactive helping behaviour involving personal initiative taking. Accordingly, these factors and their potential relationships with proactive helping behaviour are further examined below.

Role of positive psychological capital and emotional self-control in influencing proactive helping involving personal initiative taking

Positive psychological capital

Positive psychological capital was introduced to psychology, organisational behaviour and management literature in the early 2000s and has since been touted as a novel form of capital (Luthans and Broad, 2022). Positive psychological capital relates to an individual's "positive state of mind" (Sun *et al.*, 2021). Perceptions including self-efficacy (a belief in one's own abilities) and optimism (individual appraisals and an optimistic outlook) (Ergün and Avcı, 2018; Muncy and Iyer, 2020; Newman *et al.*, 2014) reflect a positive state of mind. Accordingly, positive psychological capital addresses who a person is (being confident and optimistic) and is different from other forms of capital recognised in literature, addressing "what you have" (traditional economic capital), "who you know" (social capital) and "what you know" (human capital) (Luthans *et al.*, 2004, p. 46). Positive psychological capital is also fundamentally different from values and personality traits that are more stable in nature and do not fluctuate based on events and conditions (Bardi and Schwartz, 2003; Bozgeyikli, 2017).

Positive psychological capital can be measured through four main dimensions: hope, resilience, self-efficacy and optimism (Newman *et al.*, 2014). Hope and resilience have been linked to pathway thinking and there seems to be agreement in literature that to obtain more comprehensive insight into "adaptational processes" (i.e. resilience and hope), the constructs must be studied over time (Harris *et al.*, 2018; Ong *et al.*, 2023, p. 2). Given the cross-sectional nature of this study, a further investigation of hope and resilience fell outside the scope of the current investigation. This study mainly concentrated on the assessment of positive psychological capital, as denoted by feelings of self-efficacy and optimism.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy originates from social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986) and concerns individuals' appraisal of their capacity to execute a given behaviour (Bandura, 2006, p. 309). Within a knowledge sharing context, self-efficacy may relate to a belief

in one's ability to disseminate knowledge within diverse communication settings (Ergün and Avci, 2018, p. 62).

Some scholars emphasise general self-efficacy, suggesting it relates to "a belief in one's ability across situations" (Cramer *et al.*, 2009, p. 8). This is different from task-specific self-efficacy, which focuses more on self-efficacy within a specific context. For example, internet self-efficacy relates to beliefs regarding individuals' capability to complete a task through the internet (Chen and Cheng, 2020). However, self-efficacy that is more general is said to be of greater merit than task-specific self-efficacy within models assessing beliefs and behavioural performance (Cramer *et al.*, 2009). Previous research has noted that consumers with low levels of general self-efficacy observe tasks to be more challenging, whereas consumers with high levels of general self-efficacy observe tasks to not be difficult (Ben-Ami *et al.*, 2014). Individuals with raised levels of general self-efficacy may feel more receptive to engaging in new activities and may persist more when difficulties are experienced (Wilde and Hsu, 2019).

Considering the above discussion and the current study's interest in personal initiative, being an innovative form of behaviour, this study measured general self-efficacy. In the context of this investigation, self-efficacy was operationalised as the extent to which consumers feel they manage to give others correct advice and feel content about it.

Optimism

Extant literature distinguishes between three different optimism types: self-efficacy, social and personal. Self-efficacy optimism involves a general expectation that individuals' behaviour results in positive outcomes, but is also a component of personal optimism, which depends on individuals' behaviour and external influences (Schwarzer, 1993, cited in Schweizer and Schneider, 1997). Moreover, personal optimism addresses individuals' expectations of their future, whereas social optimism concerns what individuals expect about things impacting their futures indirectly (Schwarzer, 1993, cited in Schweizer and Schneider, 1997). According to Muncy and Iyer (2020), social optimism concerns individuals' perceptions of humankind's ability to address problems, such as social and environmental issues. Consequently, social optimism is a cognitive style that individuals apply when information related to emerging ecological and social development is processed (Schweizer and Schneider, 1997). Individuals typically do not have any practical experience concerning ecological and social issues when their social optimism is assessed, but they learn from external sources, such as the media (Schweizer and Schneider, 1997). Consumer marketing literature has further noted that social optimism views may affect attitudes towards consumption (Muncy and Iyer, 2020).

Following these perspectives, social optimism may be particularly relevant for assessment in the proposed model, given the study's social context, which relates to customers assisting other customers in avoiding harmful brands. Seeing that social optimism relates to views about one's ability to address social and environmental problems, it seems likely that customers with these perceptions of social optimism may think that they can make a difference in helping other customers make more responsible purchase decisions and accordingly engage in proactive help behaviours to assist other customers with avoiding harmful brands. Therefore, guided by the research of Muncy and Iyer (2020), in this study, consumer social optimism focused

on consumers' appraisal of their ability to assist in addressing problems, such as social and environmental issues, and their subsequent optimistic outlook of the future.

Direct effects of positive psychological capital

Positive psychological capital is widely recognised as a motivator of behaviour (Ahmad *et al.*, 2022; Wu and Nguyen, 2019). Moreover, guided by earlier investigations, it seems that the potential influencing effect of the positive psychological capital on personal initiative taking can be motivated by the broaden-and-build theory of positivity (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001, 2003). According to this theory, individuals experiencing negative emotions may have limited thought-action repertoires. Their cognitive thinking may be reduced to what is needed to survive in the environment and they may follow a short-term approach and engage in actions that may not be beneficial for an organisation. In contrast, individuals with positive emotions may have "broader ways of thinking and behaving" that, as addressed earlier, could lead to them reaching out to others and, for example, providing recommendations for improving things (Avey *et al.*, 2008, p. 50; Avey *et al.*, 2011, p. 133; Fredrickson, 2003; Norman *et al.*, 2010, p. 383).

Given these perspectives, it seems plausible that customers with positive psychological capital, as denoted by general self-efficacy and social optimism, may show personal initiative and help fellow customers avoid brands that could be harmful to society. These positive individuals who may feel more receptive to engaging in new activities (Wilde and Hsu, 2019) and who believe that society is able to resolve future problems (Muncy and Iyer, 2020) might not merely focus on their own survival. Fuelled by their positive sentiments and broader way of thinking, these individuals may instead engage in actions that could assist other customers in avoiding harmful brands. Positive behaviours concerning organisational change may arise (Avey *et al.*, 2008, p. 52), such as taking initiative immediately, making rapid use of opportunities and doing more than required to help others avoid brands that could harm society (Solevik, 2017). Further support for these perspectives can be found in related studies addressing initiative and problem-solving behaviours. Taking initiative to foster change and address problems require self-belief in the ability to perform the task (Hong *et al.*, 2016). Optimism is likely to promote initiative behaviours (Thun and Bakker, 2018). Also noted before, there is potential for a positive relationship between self-efficacy perceptions and problem-solving efforts and a lack of spontaneous efforts in the event of self-doubt (Bandura, 1982; Kim and Glassman, 2013). Moreover, optimists are more inclined than pessimists to engage in problem-solving efforts (Chang, 1996). Accordingly, this study hypothesises that:

- H1. General self-efficacy positively and significantly predicts proactive helping involving personal initiative taking.
- H2. Social optimism positively and significantly predicts proactive helping involving personal initiative taking.

Indirect effect of positive psychological capital and the moderating role of emotional self-control

Besides the direct effects of the positive psychological capital dimensions, an indirect effect also seems plausible. According to the cognitive "architecture" of personality (Cervone, 2004), knowledge structures impact appraisal processes and ultimately

behavioural responses (Karademas, 2006; Pu *et al.*, 2017). Knowledge structures relate to the enduring perceptions individuals tend to develop about themselves. Individuals draw on these perceptions to interpret their world (Cervone, 2022). Contrastingly, appraisal concerns the “dynamic processes of meaning construction” (Cervone *et al.*, 2007, p. 45). Appraisals are individuals’ ongoing assessments of their relationship with the world. Individuals assess if encounters are significant and if it would be possible for them to cope with these encounters, based on their self-knowledge (Cervone *et al.*, 2006; Cervone *et al.*, 2007). In applying these principles, scholars have found significant relationships between self-efficacy and appraisals of optimism that resulted in diverse outcomes (Karademas, 2006; Pu *et al.*, 2017). Accordingly, these findings are relevant to this investigation. It seems plausible that customers’ self-efficacy perceptions, relating to advising others, could positively impact the appraisal of their ability to assist in addressing problems, such as social and environmental issues, and their subsequent optimistic outlook of the future. In view of *H2* and the principles of the broaden-and-build theory of positivity (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001, 2003), proactive helping behaviour involving personal initiative taking may then follow social optimism, as a behavioural response.

Of further importance is that the relationship between self-efficacy and optimism may be strengthened through acts of emotional self-control. Emotional self-control is grounded in emotional intelligence theory and is characterised by not feeling daunted in stressful situations or dealing with hostile people, without losing one’s temper (Goleman, 1998). It has been suggested that those who exhibit emotional self-control can manage conflict with others and avoid adverse emotional responses directed at others (Rego *et al.*, 2007). Accordingly, emotional self-control has been successfully identified as a moderator in previous investigations (Wei *et al.*, 2013). Essentially, self-control aids in fostering desirable behaviours (De Ridder *et al.*, 2012, p. 78) and assists individuals in refraining from unproductive thoughts, altering adverse moods, staying clear of hasty actions and enduring in completing tasks (Ali and Dahana, 2023). Individuals with higher levels of self-control are less likely to engage in actions that hold negative outcomes over the long term (Ali and Dahana, 2023). These individuals can sacrifice immediate gratification for reward over the long term (Yim, 2017). Self-control can aid in bringing into line individual conduct with social standards, morals and norms (Sela *et al.*, 2017).

Therefore, emotional self-control is critical for the study, seeing that it could assist individuals in returning to a positive psychological state, with a lower likelihood for anti-social behaviours (Bouckenoghe *et al.*, 2014) and greater potential for other customer assistance through proactive helping behaviours. Given the arguments presented, it is plausible that customers with perceptions of general self-efficacy, who are able to control their anger and be calm when advising other customers, may be more likely to develop perceptions of social optimism. Keeping their negative emotions in check, these individuals may not have unproductive thoughts and their adverse moods could be altered. These individuals may not be caught up with negative emotions and may be unable to sufficiently digest information or deal with it effectively and may be unable to pay attention to other matters (Goleman,

1996). Sacrificing immediate gratification for reward over the long term, these individuals may align their conduct with social standards, morals and norms and more likely believe in their ability to assist in addressing problems, such as social and environmental issues, and thus not be concerned about the future.

Following *H1* and *H2*, a moderated mediation effect is further plausible. Customers who feel they manage to give others correct advice in general and are content about it may have higher levels of social optimism. They could have a more optimistic evaluation of things to come, given their perceived ability to assist in addressing problems, such as social and environmental issues. Following their optimistic and broadened perspectives, these customers may want to further engage in personal initiatives and become involved in proactively helping other customers avoid brands that may be harmful to society. Accordingly, this proposed indirect effect could be moderated by emotional self-control, assuming that emotional self-control moderates the relationship between social optimism and general self-efficacy. Considering the characteristics of emotional self-control, as addressed above, social optimism is more likely to mediate the indirect effect when perceptions of emotional self-control are high. In view of the discussion presented in this section, it was further hypothesised that:

- H3.* General self-efficacy positively and significantly predicts social optimism.
- H4.* The effect between general self-efficacy and social optimism is moderated by emotional self-control, such as that when emotional self-control is high, general self-efficacy is more strongly associated with social optimism than in situations of low emotional self-control.
- H5.* Emotional self-control moderates the indirect effect between general self-efficacy and proactive helping involving personal initiative taking through social optimism. Specifically, the indirect effect is stronger when emotional self-control is high versus low and the moderation effect occurs between general self-efficacy and social optimism.

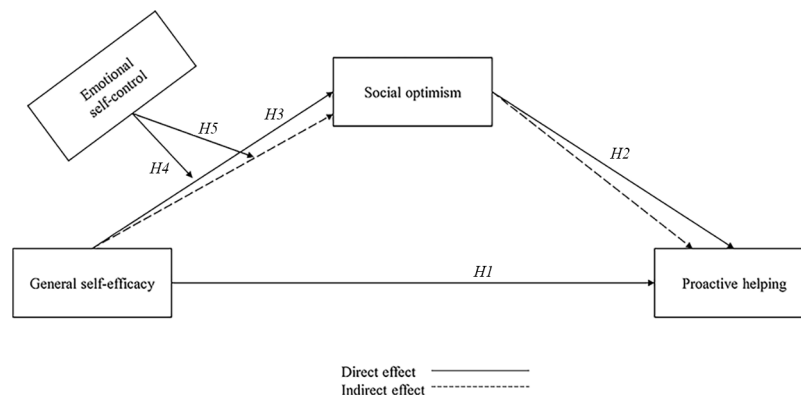
Figure 1 provides an outline of the research hypotheses that were investigated in this study.

Methodology

Measurement

Survey research was conducted and four previously established measurement scales were used to collect research data. In all instances, the original meaning (stem) of the scale items were maintained, whereas the wording of the scale items was modified to relate it to the context of this study. For example, in measuring general self-efficacy, five scale items from Wien and Olsen (2017) were used. The context was adapted from confidence in purchase decisions to assessing the extent to which consumers feel they manage to give others correct advice and feel content about it. The four-item scale of Muncy and Iyer (2020) was used to measure the respondents’ social optimism perspectives. The context of the scale was modified to measure the respondents’ own optimistic perceptions.

Figure 1 Conceptual model



Source: Authors own creation

Personal initiative in relation to helping others avoid brands that may be harmful to society was measured using an adaptation of the seven-item personal initiative scale by Solesvik (2017). The original scale provided generic items. A context was added to the measurement scale. Subsequently, the scale items measured the personal initiative behaviours in relation to helping others avoid brands that may be harmful to society. Following recommendations by earlier researchers, it was the intention to use a shortened version of this scale. Shortened research scales may contribute to improved internal consistency and administration (Merle *et al.*, 2010, p. 507).

Accordingly, a pretest was conducted among students at two universities. Sample selection for the pretest was based upon convenience with business and non-business classes being canvassed. Students' participation was completely voluntary and anonymous, with no bonus or penalty predicated upon their decision to participate or not. An email with a link to the questionnaire was sent to each member of the selected classes with access by the student attained via a simple click. Therefore, the net sample (175 respondents) for the pre-test comprised members of the target population with no uninvited respondents included.

The questionnaire included an array of demographics, 24 questions regarding attitudes and behaviours germane to anti-consumption, three quality control questions designed to identify and exclude inattentive respondents and 13 multi-item scales of which the personal initiative scales used in this study were a subset. This data set was subjected to scrutiny in an effort to identify glitches that needed to be addressed, while also verifying the internal reliability for each multi-item scale. Each scale produced an alpha coefficient that exceeded the 0.7 threshold that is viewed as a prerequisite for research of this ilk (Nunnally, 1978). Using the results obtained from the pretest, corrected item-total correlations of the personal initiative scale were also assessed as a measure of internal quality (Merle *et al.*, 2010, p. 508; Stanton *et al.*, 2002). Extant research denotes that correlation coefficients greater than 0.75 are generally indicative of a "good to excellent" relationship (Luo *et al.*, 2010). Accordingly, the first two items and the last item of the original scale presented by Solesvik (2017) were deleted. These scale items obtained corrected item-total correlations of 0.75 and lower, whereas the four remaining scale items obtained

corrected item-total correlations greater than 0.75. Emotional self-control was measured using the three-item scale by Rego *et al.* (2010). Generic scale items were provided that were subsequently measured in the context of exercising self-control when advising others. All construct items were assessed using a six-point Likert-type scale examining level of agreement that ranged from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (6). The choice of Likert scale is justified in view of earlier research. In their empirical research, Nadler *et al.* (2015) found that not all respondents tend to interpret the midpoint in the scale in the same way, which may affect the reliability of the results. In addition, more recent research uncovered that scales, including six or more response options, tend to produce stronger convergent validity and it has also been noted that the human mind is able to pay attention to approximately six objects at one point in time (Taherdoost, 2019).

Sampling, data collection and analysis

As no sampling frame was available, a purposive sampling approach was supported. Two screening questions were included in the survey and tested whether the respondents:

- 1 were aged 18 years and older; and
- 2 generally consulted fellow customers about ethical consumption.

The respondents had to respond positively to both questions to qualify to participate in the study. The above criteria were important, given the proposed model. The study was interested in the help customers provide to other customers to avoid harmful brands and the factors that may contribute to these behaviours. Accordingly, it was necessary to find respondents who engaged in helping behaviours in relation to ethical consumption practices, to ensure they would be able to relate to their own experiences when rating the helping behaviour items as well as the scales that measured the antecedent factors. In addition, ethics clearance was obtained for the study, with the understanding that the survey would only target adult respondents (18 years and older) and not children, who are considered vulnerable consumers and be unable to provide rationalised answers to the survey. Although the survey may further have excluded other respondents who do not commonly provide assistance with ethical consumption practices and

subsequently limits understanding of their potential interactions with other customers, the sampling approach was useful, as it ensured credible and accurate answers would be obtained from respondents who engaged in helping behaviours. These responses would subsequently aid in testing the proposed research model and broadening understanding of customers' proactive assistance in helping other customers avoid harmful brands.

An accredited research agency in South Africa used a research panel (a group of customers that occasionally completes surveys for the research agency) to collect data on behalf of the researchers. The research agency distributed the self-administered questionnaire via email to the research panel, who voluntarily completed the survey online. A small monetary incentive that was connected to a draw aided in survey completion. The respondents' answers were automatically saved in an Excel sheet. All information that would aid in identifying individual respondents was removed before the data set was handed over to the researchers.

The final realised sample comprised 256 respondents: 45.7% female and 53.1% male. In addition, one respondent selected the gender neutral/non-binary option and another respondent preferred not to answer the question. Most respondents were 26–55 years old (59%), followed by the 56–75 years (35.2%) age group. Almost two-thirds of the respondents worked full time (64.1%), whereas the second largest number of responses were obtained from retired respondents (16.4%). Only 1.2% of the respondents did not have a high school qualification or preferred not to answer the question. Accordingly, the respondents surveyed were well represented by gender, were of a mature age, were employed or had been in employment and had some level of education.

The research data were analysed using the maximum likelihood procedure (Byrne, 2001). Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted first. A measurement model was compiled in Mplus 8.5 to verify construct validity and reliability (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Thereafter, factor scores of the measurement model constructs were retained and saved into RStudio to conduct the regression analysis. Model 7 of the Hayes (2013) PROCESS macro was tested in RStudio (RStudio Team, 2020) to conclude on the hypotheses formulated. Mediating effects were verified using bootstrap resampling (5,000 draws and 95% confidence interval [CI]).

Results

Reliability and validity measures

A measurement model was compiled that included the four constructs being investigated in this study. The first items of the social optimism scale delivered a factor loading lower than 0.5 and had to be deleted. The revised measurement model presented fit statistics within the acceptable range for good fit (Hair *et al.*, 2019): $\chi^2(df = 84) = 213.02$; ($\chi^2/df = 2.54$); comparative fit index = 0.95; Tucker–Lewis index = 0.93; and root mean square error of approximation = 0.077.

As per Table 1, all measurement items obtained significant loadings ($p < 0.001$), varying between 0.56 and 0.96. Reliability was further established. For all four latent variables, the composite reliability values were within the acceptable boundary, exceeding 0.7 (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

Table 2 provides evidence of convergent and discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The average variance extracted (AVE) values for the four latent constructs were greater than the suggested threshold of 0.5, ranging between 0.58 and 0.76. In addition, in all instances, the AVE values far exceeded the relevant pair of squared correlations, indicating that the latent variables investigated were different from one another. Subsequently, the measurement model's latent variable factor scores were saved and used as input to assess the regression model in RStudio.

Assessment of common-method bias

Common-method bias was assessed using Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Substantial potential for common-method bias is only evident in cases of common-method variance being close to 70% or higher (Fuller *et al.*, 2016). The total variance that was accounted for by a single factor was 34.18%, which is significantly lower than 70%. Subsequently, no additional measures were required to account for common-method bias in the data.

Regression result and hypotheses testing

Table 3 presents the statistics obtained from Model 7 of the Hayes (2013) PROCESS macro tested in RStudio. Model 7 tested the research model that was proposed for this study. As indicated in Table 3 (Model 7, Stages 1 and 2), all regression relationships tested are significant and the unstandardised coefficients vary between 0.08 and 0.52. Moreover, general self-efficacy had a strong effect on both social optimism (coefficient = 0.52, $p < 0.001$) and proactive helping (coefficient = 0.41, $p < 0.001$), whereas the significant effect of social optimism on proactive helping was relatively small (coefficient = 0.08, $p < 0.05$).

In addition, Table 3 (Model 7, Stage 1) denotes that the coefficient of the product between general self-efficacy and emotional self-control is significant in the model that specified social optimism as the outcome variable (coefficient = 0.37, $p < 0.01$). Emotional self-control moderated the relationship between general self-efficacy and social optimism. The moderated direct effect of general self-efficacy on social optimism varied between high (point estimate: 0.74, $p < 0.001$), moderate (point estimate: 0.57, $p < 0.001$) and low (point estimate: 0.30, $p < 0.05$) levels of emotional self-control.

Furthermore, the index of moderated mediation was significant (coefficient = 0.03, SE = 0.02, 95% bootstrap CI = 0.001–0.084). The CI did not include a zero value. These findings indicate that emotional self-control moderated the indirect effect of general self-efficacy on proactive helping through social optimism (Hayes, 2018). The indirect effect of general self-efficacy on proactive helping was larger at higher levels of emotional self-control (coefficient = 0.06, SE = 0.03, 95% bootstrap CI [0.004, 0.127]) and significant and weaker at moderate levels of emotional self-control (coefficient = 0.04, SE = 0.02, 95% bootstrap CI [0.003, 0.095]), but not significantly different from zero at weaker levels of emotional self-control (coefficient = 0.02, SE = 0.02, 95% bootstrap CI [–0.003, 0.056]).

Accordingly, considering the above results, all five hypotheses formulated for this study were supported. Figure 2 provides a graphical depiction of the unstandardised beta weights that were obtained in this study.

Table 1 Assessment of latent variables

Variable items	Std. factor loading	Std. error of loading	CR
<i>Proactive helping</i>			
Whenever there is a chance to get actively involved in helping others avoid brands that may be harmful to society, I take it	0.61	0.04	0.88
I take initiative immediately in helping others avoid brands that may be harmful to society, even when other people do not	0.81	0.03	
I make rapid use of opportunities to help others avoid brands that may be harmful to society	0.91	0.02	
Usually I do more than I am asked to do to help others avoid brands that may be harmful to society	0.84	0.02	
<i>General self-efficacy</i>			
I never second guess the advice I give to others	0.62	0.04	0.88
I am always sure about the advice I give to others	0.76	0.03	
I never wonder if I gave others the right advice	0.56	0.05	
I always feel I manage to give the right advice to others	0.96	0.01	
I am always content with the advice I give to others	0.92	0.01	
<i>Emotional self-control</i>			
I can stay calm even when others I advise are angry	0.71	0.04	0.81
I can calm down whenever I am furious with others I advise	0.87	0.03	
Rarely do I stay furious with others I advise	0.70	0.04	
<i>Social optimism</i>			
The major problems that we face today are not a threat to our future because I can help solve them	0.89	0.02	0.90
When I see a big problem the world faces, it does not concern me that much because I know I can help to eventually solve the problem	0.94	0.02	
When I think of social or environmental issues we face, I am not concerned about the future. I can help to find ways to solve the problems we face. I always have	0.77	0.03	
Note: All factors loaded significantly at $p < 0.001$			
Source: Authors' own creation			

Note: All factors loaded significantly at $p < 0.001$

Source: Authors' own creation

Table 2 Latent factor correlation matrix with AVE on the diagonal in brackets

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Proactive helping	(0.64)			
2. General self-efficacy	0.46	(0.61)		
3. Emotional self-control	0.30	0.43	(0.58)	
4. Social optimism	0.28	0.36	0.22	(0.76)

Note: All correlations are statistically significant at $p < 0.001$

Source: Authors' own creation

Discussion

This research aimed to propose a model that provides an integrated understanding of the degree to which positive psychological capital (self-efficacy and optimism) may influence customers' proactive helping behaviours involving personal initiative taking. In addition, the study intended to advance knowledge of the potential moderating effect of emotional self-control within the proposed model.

Further insight into these matters is imperative, seeing that the proactive helping behaviours involving personal initiative taking may serve as an efficient solution to guide fellow customers needing further assistance to avoid harmful brands. Amid the need for more responsible purchasing practices, customers are generally exposed to numerous brands and tend

to base their product choices on easy-to-evaluate product characteristics. Customers may focus less on ethical strengths in their product evaluations, seeing that the evaluation of moral values are more complex in nature (Schamp *et al.*, 2019). Customers with knowledge about ethical brands could assist when they engage in proactive helping behaviours and take personal initiative to help other customers solve problems and doubts they may experience in avoiding harmful brands. Consequently, a broadened understanding was needed of customers' proactive helping behaviours that may aid fellow customers in making more responsible purchase decisions and to address the limited research in this regards.

Following the empirical investigation, all five hypotheses formulated for this study were supported. Accordingly, from a theoretical perspective, the current research contributes to consumer behaviour and expands knowledge of proactive helping behaviour, positive psychological capital and emotional self-control.

Firstly, the current research aids in filling the research gap by advancing understanding of the application of proactive helping behaviour in relation to personal initiative taking and assistance with avoiding harmful brands. Although helping as a dimension of customer citizenship behaviour has been widely studied (McGrath and Otnes, 1995; Price *et al.*, 1995; Van Tonder *et al.*, 2023), the proactive form of helping has received

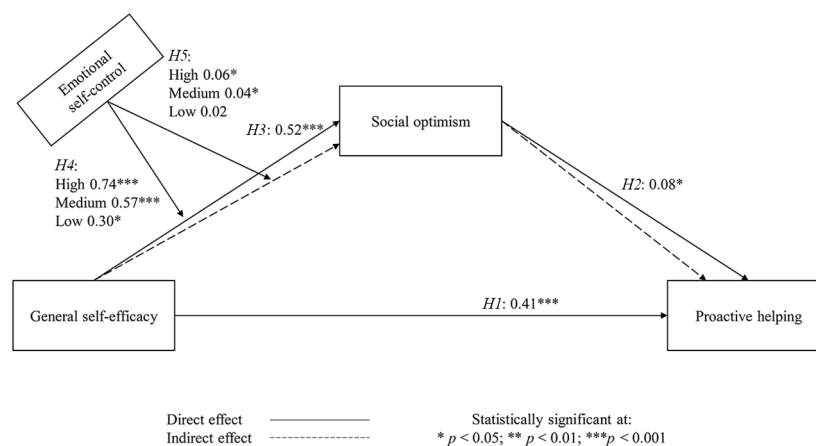
Table 3 Regression results

Variable	Coefficient	S.E.	t	(Model 7) p	CI (low)	CI (high)
Stage 1 (Social optimism)						
General self-efficacy	0.52	0.10	5.31	0.001***	0.326	0.710
General self-efficacy ^a emotional self-control	0.37	0.13	2.93	0.004**	0.121	0.619
Stage 2 (Proactive helping)						
General self-efficacy	0.41	0.05	7.56	0.001***	0.303	0.516
Social optimism	0.08	0.04	2.20	0.029*	0.008	0.150

Notes: CI = confidence interval; ***Significant at $p < 0.001$; **significant at $p < 0.01$; *significant at $p < 0.05$

Source: Authors' own creation

Figure 2 Regression model



Source: Authors own creation

less attention in consumer marketing literature. Earlier studies addressing proactive helping behaviours have been largely qualitative in nature and mostly focus on the identification and description of the proactive helper role within various retail settings, such as bookstores, gift stores, discount stores and garden centres (McGrath and Otnes, 1995; Parker and Ward, 2000). Moreover, some advances have been made on the connections customer satisfaction (Wu, 2008) and personality type have with proactive helping (Zourrig and Chebat, 2009). Nevertheless, none of the studies have centred on proactive helping behaviour in relation to responsible purchasing practices.

The research findings show customers get actively involved in taking initiatives immediately, make rapid use of opportunities and do more than being asked to help others avoid brands that may be harmful to society. Accordingly, the findings are important to consumer literature, as it for the first time provides a quantitative account for measuring proactive helping behaviours involving personal initiative taking to assist other customers avoid harmful brands. Even more important is that additional insight is obtained into helping behaviour in an ethical context. Previous investigations addressing customer helping in an ethical context have emphasised fellow customer assistance in relation to the purchasing of ethical products (Van Tonder *et al.*, 2023). However, given this study's findings, it is clear that customer

helpers may also shift their focus to assisting other customers avoid harmful brands and subsequently may guide other customers' ethical behaviours in this regard. Accordingly, the current research findings addressing the avoidance of harmful brands in general may pave the way for further research and aid in the assessment of proactive helping behaviours in relation to brand avoidance behaviours in various ethical research contexts.

Furthermore, proactive helping behaviours in relation to brand avoidance may be influenced by positive psychological factors. As addressed earlier, both self-efficacy and optimism have been associated with willingness to engage in problem-solving efforts (Bandura, 1982; Chang, 1996; Kim and Glassman, 2013) and initiative behaviours (Bandura, 1982; Kim and Glassman, 2013; Thun and Bakker, 2018). Accordingly, this research extends knowledge of the influence of self-efficacy and optimism on proactive helping involving personal initiative taking and brand avoidance behaviours and subsequently provides novel insight in this regards. Supported by the Fredrickson (1998, 2001, 2003) broaden-and-build theory of positivity, this study shows that customers with a positive frame of mind (i.e. optimistic and having favourable judgement of their capabilities to perform a given task) may not merely focus on their own survival. Fuelled by their positive sentiments and resultant broadened way of thinking, they may instead engage in proactive helping behaviours that could assist other customers in avoiding harmful

brands. These findings are meaningful, as they address the gap identified in this study, pertaining to the underlying reasons why customers may take initiative and proactively help other customers avoid harmful brands. It seems that customers' positive psychological states significantly affect their motivation to guide other customers in engaging in responsible purchasing practices.

However, the two psychological antecedents also seem to be connected, leading to a further behavioural response. Framed by the cognitive “architecture” of personality (Cervone, 2004), it appears plausible that when self-efficacy perceptions lead to positive appraisals and optimism, a response may result. These expectations are confirmed by the research findings. Customers' self-efficacy perceptions (in relation to advice giving) seem to influence their appraisals of their ability to assist in addressing problems and their subsequent optimistic outlook of the future. Following this outlook, proactive helping involving personal initiative taking may follow, as attributed to by the broaden-and-build theory of positivity (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001, 2003). Subsequently, the findings demonstrate that in addition to the direct influence of positive psychological capital on proactive helping behaviours, an indirect effect may also be possible, when both the cognitive “architecture” of personality theory (Cervone, 2004) and the broaden-and-build theory of positivity (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001, 2003) are at play. The findings are further important as they extend earlier research in the related discipline of psychology (Karademas, 2006; Pu *et al.*, 2017) and demonstrate that in a consumer context, proactive helping behaviours may follow perceptions of self-efficacy and optimism.

The indirect effect may further be moderated by emotional self-control. The research findings confirm that emotional self-control moderates the relationship between general self-efficacy and social optimism. As emotional self-control increases, so will the effect of general self-efficacy on social optimism. As this effect is relatively strong at high levels of emotional self-control and much weaker at low levels of emotional self-control, emotional self-control appears to be highly relevant in research involving positive psychological capital. As such, it seems, although previous research denoted that a positive state of mind (e.g. self-efficacy) may affect a further positive state of mind (i.e. optimism) (Karademas, 2006, p. 1283; Luszczynska *et al.*, 2005, pp. 441–442; Pu *et al.*, 2017, p. 411), the control of negative emotions (e.g. anger) is also relevant and may contribute to an enhanced effect on optimism. Overall, the research findings further indicate that the indirect effect of general self-efficacy on proactive helping involving personal initiative through social optimism is stronger at higher levels of emotional self-control and significant and weaker at moderate levels of emotional self-control.

Consequently, it is evident that this study's research findings fill the gap and contribute to a broadened understanding of the proactive assistance customers may provide to other customers in avoiding brands that may be harmful to society as well as the factors contributing to these behaviours. The underlying mechanism of factors leading to proactive helping involving personal initiative taking is complex. The research findings show an interplay between general self-efficacy, social optimism and self-control of negative emotions, with a stronger effect being plausible when customers with positive

psychological states can control their negative emotions when proactively helping other customers.

Managerial implications

The research findings may be valuable to social groups or organisations acting as “social agents of society”, including consumer advocacy groups, companies endorsing ethical behaviours and other organisers of boycotts (Yuksel, 2013, p. 212). Customers providing proactive assistance to other customers about avoiding harmful brands may serve as a valuable source to instil more responsible purchasing practices. Furthermore, as customers may help other customers within online brand communities (Zhu *et al.*, 2016) or offline at home, work or within stores (McGrath and Otnes, 1995; Van Tonder *et al.*, 2023), a broad spectrum of customers may be reached through the helping behaviours that could extend across national borders.

Therefore, it may be highly beneficial for social agents of society to devise strategies to facilitate the proactive helping behaviours of customers and to leverage from the help customers provide to other customers in the consumer marketplace. Customers providing online help may be found on social media platforms and within online brand communities. Conversely, customers providing help offline may also seek guidance through the internet or may be reached through other platforms, such as magazines or main stream media.

Guided by the study's research findings, strategies to influence the proactive customer helping should concentrate on several aspects. For instance, customers' confidence levels should be enhanced, seeing that perceptions of general self-efficacy may directly and indirectly – through the enhancement of social optimism – contribute to proactive helping behaviour. Previous research denotes that perceptions of self-efficacy could be enhanced by knowledge. Specifically, individuals with advanced knowledge levels may have greater behavioural control and more confidence in their skill to perform the relevant activity (Sreen *et al.*, 2021). From a practical perspective, knowledge about harmful brands could be reinforced using tools like advertorials and websites. Information could be communicated about harmful product chemicals and the negative effect these may have on the environment if brands containing these chemicals are supported. Furthermore, customers could be informed about brands violating human rights and investigations confirming these claims. Customers could also be advised about the effects of climate change and their responsibilities in preserving the environment. As such, fact-checking tools may further assist in verifying information, such as which products are tested on animals and in which country the products are manufactured. In addition, social media influencers could help reaffirm the importance of responsible purchasing practices and the risk of non-compliance (Chen and Cheng, 2020). Stories and pictures could be shared about the damage harmful brands may cause to the environment, people and animals and followers could be urged to be more careful in their brand selections.

Greater effects may be obtained if customers can control negative emotions of anger when giving advice. Managing anger levels is a challenging task. However, online discussion forums and the influence of brand communities could be of some assistance. Previous research indicates that close relationships and social

support could be conducive for promoting self-control (Zhang and Cai, 2022). Customers should be reminded of the cause at hand and their responsibility in ensuring other customers avoid harmful brands. In addition, social agents of society could be helpful by stimulating conversations about responsible purchasing practices and playing on customers' duty to help others. For example, media campaigns could focus on customers' moral values and urge them to help other customers avoid purchasing products that are harmful to society. Campaigns could focus on products like cosmetics tested on animals and fur that should not be purchased, owing to the level of animal killing involved. Accordingly, these campaigns could create greater awareness of responsible purchasing practices and stimulate further debate on social media sites, where customers could be advised to play their part and ensure harmful brands are avoided.

Given the above, it is clear that the successful facilitation of proactive helping behaviours may largely depend on the collaborative efforts between social agents of society and customers tasked with assisting other customers in making responsible purchase decisions. It is imperative that support is provided to ensure customers remain confident in their ability to advise others about avoiding harmful brands and are inspired to take initiative and guide other customers on their brand selections.

Conclusions and suggestions for future research

The current research provides a broadened understanding of the proactive assistance customers could provide to other customers. Proactive helping involving personal initiative taking may be particularly beneficial, considering its “self-starting” approach, where customers focus on solving other customers' problems (Frese and Fay, 2001). Accordingly, this study provides novel insight into the matter by advancing knowledge of proactive helping behaviour involving personal initiative taking to assist other customers in avoiding harmful brands. An integrated understanding was obtained of the degree to which positive psychological capital (self-efficacy and optimism) may influence customers' proactive helping behaviours involving personal initiative taking as well as the potential moderating effect of emotional self-control within the proposed model. Overall, there seems to be an interplay between customers' positive psychological state of mind and their self-control of negative emotions, which may affect their proactive helping behaviours.

The findings are relevant to consumer behaviour scholars and extends knowledge of the cognitive “architecture” of personality theory (Cervone, 2004), the broaden-and-build theory of positivity (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001, 2003) and emotional intelligence theory (Goleman, 1996), and the extent to which these theories can be applied in explaining the complex relationships between factors leading to proactive helping involving personal initiative taking. As such, this study provides a baseline for future research, addressing proactive helping behaviours involving personal initiative taking while concurrently assisting social agents of society to develop effective marketing strategies to facilitate more responsible purchasing practices.

Future research could extend this model by delving deeper into the types of personal initiative activities that customers may perform when helping other customers avoid brands that could

be harmful to society. The current research is limited to a generic measurement of personal initiative taking. Organisational literature alludes to leadership and creativity as specific dimensions of personal initiative (Tena and Bustelo, 2016). It is likely that these factors may also transpire in a consumer context, with proactive helpers perhaps having to lead the way and engage in creative efforts to ensure fellow customers engage in responsible purchasing practices. Qualitative research involving personal interviews or focus groups may further explain this matter. Moreover, the current investigation only emphasises general self-efficacy. The proposed model could be extended by considering task-specific self-efficacy (Latikka et al., 2019) and comparing and contrasting its influencing effect against general self-efficacy. It is expected that general self-efficacy may have a greater influence on proactive helping behaviours, seeing that this construct is believed to have greater merit than task-specific self-efficacy within models assessing beliefs and behavioural performance (Cramer et al., 2009). However, further research is needed to verify these relationships.

This study's research data were collected by means of self-reported measures, seeing that it is considered in literature as an effective method to obtain accurate information from the respondents if the questions are answered honestly. Self-reported data are also relatively inexpensive and quick to obtain. In general, people prefer to focus on themselves in conversations, rather than on other people. However, potential downfalls of this method include that it may lead to socially desirable responses. Respondents may want to place themselves in a favourable position or they have a distorted perception of themselves, and they may not know themselves very well. Surveys involving self-response options also take time to compile (McDonald, 2008). Accordingly, data confidentiality and anonymous reporting techniques were implemented to reduce potential social desirability of the self-reported data and to address the potential problem of impression management. Future research may want to consider additional data collection methods, such as experiments, to further verify the external validity of the study and to account for other problems associated with self-reported responses (Ried et al., 2022). In addition, more research is needed to advance knowledge of the effect of customers' personal initiative behaviours within the consumer behaviour domain. Previous research in organisational literature suggests that personal initiative may lead to greater innovation (Mustafa et al., 2023). It is expected that similar effects are plausible in the consumer domain and more research is needed to uncover the plausible consumer innovation activities that may result from the personal initiative behaviours. Focus group research could also assist in this regards.

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Corresponding author

Estelle van Tonder can be contacted at: estellevantonder4@gmail.com