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Morality, Suspicion, and Modification: New Directions After 15 Years' Persuasion Knowledge Research

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SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY

Morality, Suspicion, and Modification: New Directions After 15 Years' Persuasion Knowledge Research

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Although marketing is essentially used by companies to communicate with consumers, sometimes, marketers use tricky, deviant, and even immoral persuasion tactics. Due to the constant exposure to marketers' tactics consumers may then become habitually suspicious about marketplace persuasion. Over time, routine suspicion can turn into more schematic knowledge about the tactics that marketers use in persuasion attempts (Friestad and Wright 1994). During the past fifteen years, researchers have examined how the persuasion knowledge (PK) can change the perceived meaning of a persuasion attempt in ways that were not originally intended by marketers. This special session provides a new direction that extends the current persuasion knowledge research.

Existing literature has documented that PK-induced judgments of an influence agent tend to be negative due to the general defensive mechanism of suspicion (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Darke and Ritchie 2007). The consequential responses can be either relatively automatic leading to bias (Darke, Ashworth, and Ritchie 2008); or more deliberate and modified by consumers' goals, experiences, and preferences (Kirmani and Campbell 2004). This special session further explores these intriguing and sometimes contradictory issues regarding the potential boundary conditions for suspicion and inference. More specifically, the four papers proposed for this session investigate consumer perceptions of the morality of marketers' persuasion tactics, the effects of suspicion, and motivational and situational cues that modify the initial PK-induced judgments and reactions. Under what conditions are marketing tactics viewed as being more (or less) morally acceptable to consumers, and under what conditions are consumers more (or less) suspicious about these tactics? The findings throughout this session shed further light on how consumers cope with persuasion attempts.

Paper 1 (Kirmani et al.) examines how consumers make tradeoffs between an influence agent's competency (an intrinsic utilitarian judgment) and morality (an extrinsic moral judgment) when suspicion is activated. A "sinful success" vs. "virtuous failure" dilemma appears salient. This dilemma, however, can be accounted for by the immediacy of the decision and the consumer's relationship with the influence agent. Paper 2 (Grayson and Rank) further demonstrates that consumers differ in their intuitive theories about the extent to which a persuasion tactic is socially appropriate. Consumers with more advanced persuasion knowledge tend to view tactics normatively appropriate, but morally inappropriate. Paper 3 (Darke) describes strategies for combating the persistent negative bias induced by the defensive suspicion. Multiple trust cues, knowledge of government regulation, and the use of aschematic tactics are all effective in buffering against the otherwise persistent effects of defensive suspicion. Finally, paper 4 (Xie et al.) identifies situations when proactive or reactive responses occur as a result of suspicion, depending upon consumers' regulatory focus and persuasion knowledge to manage interactions with an influence agent.

Combined, these four papers examine how consumers react against marketers' potentially immoral persuasion tactics and how their suspicions about these tactics can be enhanced or attenuated. These papers advance the literature in three ways. First, these studies provide insights about a number of factors that either

strengthen or weaken consumers' suspicion. Second, the results suggest that consumers do not view persuasion tactics used by marketers as simply black and white, wrong or right; instead consumers rely on both utility value and moral value to judge the appropriateness of a persuasion tactic. Third, the studies extend previous research on persuasion knowledge by specifying situations when consumers can pragmatically adjust the PK-induced negative judgments of the influence agents. After fifteen years of persuasion knowledge research, scholars continue to ask new thought-provoking questions. This session captures cutting edge research that contributes to the theoretical advancement of consumer behavior in response to marketplace persuasion.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

"Which Agent Do You Prefer: A Sinful Succeeder or a Virtuous Failure?"

Amna Kirmani, University of Maryland, USA
Rebecca W. Hamilton, University of Maryland, USA
Debra V. Thompson, Georgetown University, USA

We examine how consumers' trade off competence and morality when evaluating marketing agents. Although the general information formation literature predicts that individuals place greater weight on morality than competence, we predict that in marketing contexts, consumers may value an agent's competence more than morality. We investigate three factors that might affect how consumers weigh competence and morality: 1) the immediacy of the decision making horizon; 2) self vs. other perspective; and 3) the target-agent relationship. Three studies find support for the predictions.

Competence and morality are two fundamental dimensions in social perception (Rosenburg, Nelson, and Vivekanathan 1968). Morality encompasses traits such as honesty and caring, while competence includes traits such as cleverness and skill. An interesting question that has not been addressed in prior research is how consumers trade off morality and competence when choosing a marketing agent.

The literature on general impression formation predicts that morality-related traits are more important than competence-related traits. For example, Wojciszke (1994) finds that evaluation of individuals is more favorable under *virtuous failure* (the behavior is moral, but incompetent) than under *sinful success* (the behavior is competent, but immoral). In contrast, we propose that in marketing contexts, consumers may place greater weight on competence than morality. Particularly in short-term transactions, the consumer's objective is likely to be to achieve his/her purchase goals (Kirmani and Campbell 2004). If the consumer is focusing on the agent's ability to help achieve purchase goals, competence-related traits should be salient.

We examine several conditions under which sinful success may be preferred to virtuous failure: 1) the immediacy of the decision making horizon; 2) self vs. other perspective; and 3) the target-agent relationship.

The immediacy of the decision making horizon refers to how quickly the consumer must accomplish his/her marketing goals. We predict that immediacy will encourage a consumer to prefer a sinful

success over a virtuous failure. This was tested in a 2 (Type of Agent: virtuous failure vs. sinful success) X 2 (Immediacy of Decision making: high vs. low) between-subjects design. Participants were asked to imagine that they were looking for a real estate agent to sell their house. The agent was described as moral but less successful (virtuous failure) or as deceptive but successful (sinful success). Immediacy was manipulated by informing participants that they needed to sell their house in three months (high immediacy) or without mentioning a time horizon (low immediacy). Consistent with our prediction, participants in the low immediacy condition were significantly more likely to hire the moral, less successful agent, while those in the high immediacy condition were marginally more inclined to hire the deceptive but successful agent.

In the second study, we predicted that, consistent with the fundamental attribution error, participants would believe these factors would influence others' decisions more than their own. This study was a 2 (Type of Agent: virtuous failure vs. sinful success) X 2 (Perspective: self vs. other) between-subjects design. The agent factor was manipulated through the real estate scenario described earlier. Perspective was manipulated by asking participants to imagine that they (or their neighbor) were looking for a real estate agent to sell their house. An ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect, indicating that, for themselves, participants were more likely to hire the virtuous failure than the sinful success agent, but thought others would be marginally more likely to hire the sinful success agent.

In the third study, we used a within subjects manipulation of type of agent in order to highlight the trade-off between competence and morality. The study was a 2 (Type of agent: virtuous failure vs. sinful success) X 2 (Target-Agent relationship: short vs. long term) X 2 (Tactic: harmful vs. not harmful) mixed design. Participants read about two sales agents, Dave and Eric, who work in a sporting goods store. Dave's description will with sinful success, while Eric was described as a virtuous failure. The target-agent relationship was manipulated through specifying the purchase situation as one-time or as an ongoing relationship. Tactic was manipulated by whether the sinful behavior directly affected the consumer or not. We predicted that in short-term relationships, sinful success will be preferred to virtuous failure, but that this preference was reversed in long-term relationships. When the tactic could hurt the consumer, however, the morality effect prevailed in the short run.

"Persuasion Knowledge and Moral Judgment"

Kent Grayson, Northwestern University, USA

Tracy Rank, DePaul University, USA

Previously, persuasion knowledge (PK) research has focused primarily on how consumers' beliefs about motives and tactics help them to cope with persuasion attempts. Friestad and Wright (1994) also propose that PK will influence consumers' perceptions of the appropriateness of marketing tactics. However, they make no specific suggestions about the nature of these judgments. *Do consumers with high levels of PK tend to judge persuasion tactics to be more appropriate—or less?*

The answer to this question is not immediately obvious. Those with higher levels of PK could be more sensitive to the manipulateness of persuasive tactics and therefore tend to view them as being *less* appropriate. Alternatively, those with higher levels of PK might be more comfortable with the "rules of the game" of persuasion and therefore judge persuasion tactics as being *more* appropriate.

Exploratory Study. Independent Variables: We asked respondents (N=63) to rate Campbell and Kirmani's (2000) scenario in which a salesperson flatters a customer either before the sale or

after, and then asked them to respond to the Bearden et al. (2001) PK scale. *Dependent Variables:* Appropriateness was defined and operationalized as "normatively acceptable" (Friestad and Wright 1994, p. 10). *Results:* Although level of PK predicted differences in perceived honesty of the salesperson, it did not predict significant differences in perceived appropriateness.

Study One. Based on the results of Campbell and Kirmani's (2000) study three, we hypothesized that priming respondents with PK might prompt perceived differences in appropriateness. Study one was the same as our exploratory study, with the exception that half of our respondents (N=228) were asked to complete the PK scale before evaluating the sales scenario, and half after. *Results:* Unprimed respondents mirrored the null results of our exploratory study. However, when primed, those with low PK significantly lowered their perceptions of overall appropriateness. Therefore, Study One suggests that (when primed) those with low PK view sales scenarios as being less appropriate than those with high PK.

Study Two. Will those low in PK always rate a sales scenario as being less appropriate than those high in PK? We hypothesized that when the salesperson is also a friend, this may create a conflict in normative expectations: is it more appropriate for the person to act like a friend or like a persuasion agent? Results (N= 268) show that those with high PK rated the salesperson's flattery as being more appropriate when it occurred after the sale (as opposed to before), whereas those with low PK rated the salesperson's flattery as being more appropriate when it occurred before (as opposed to after). These results add evidence to the proposition that those with high PK differ from the expectations of those with low PK.

Study Three. Appropriateness has two dimensions—whether the behavior is appropriate to the situation and whether the behavior is ethically or morally appropriate (Friestad and Wright 1994, p. 5, 10). We hypothesized that while those with high PK may believe that persuasive behavior is more normatively appropriate in sales situations, their high level of knowledge in such situations makes them more sensitive (than those low in PK) to the moral implications of persuasive tactics.

The protocol for this study drew from Cohen and colleagues' (1991, 1993, 2001) moral judgment research. One of Cohen's test scenarios describes a store salesperson who behaves in a morally questionable way, while other scenarios focus on morally questionable behavior in other business situations. Results (N=123) show that those with high PK rated the salesperson scenario as being less morally acceptable than those with low PK. However, regarding two other scenarios, there were no differences in the ratings of those with high (versus low) PK.

Combined, the results of our three studies suggest that PK does influence perceptions of tactic acceptability. However, our studies also find that the direction of the link between level of knowledge and acceptability depends on how "acceptability" is defined. When defined as normatively appropriate, those with higher PK view tactics as being more appropriate. When defined as morally acceptable, those with higher PK view tactics as being less appropriate.

"Shedding the Veil of Suspicion: Avoiding the Effects of Defensive Suspicion"

Peter R. Darke, York University, Canada

The defensive suspicion model (DSM; Darke and Ritchie 2007) recognizes that judgments of suspicion involve both deliberative and automatic information processing. Moreover, while accuracy goals may drive judgment, suspicion often involves more defensive, self-protective goals. The latter involve ego-threat, and lead to persistent biases in judgment aimed at reducing such threat. Like the PKM, the DSM is essentially a dual process model.

However, the PKM focuses more on deliberative forms of information processing and accuracy goals whereas the DSM is more focused on automatic processing and defense goals.

The DSM model was tested in series of experiments (Darke and Ritchie 2007; Darke et al. 2008). Consistent with predictions, consumers deceived by an initial advertisement were less trusting and had more negative attitudes towards second-party advertisements. This generalized suspicion effect operated through defensive stereotyping (Sinclair and Kunda 1999), where deception evoked the broad stereotype that no advertising could be trusted. Ego threat was a necessary condition for generalized suspicion to occur. Generalized suspicion also proved difficult to counteract. For instance, strong arguments were no more effective in combating generalized suspicion than weak arguments, and the existing reputation of the second advertiser did little to protect it from generalized suspicion. This talk presents new research identifying factors that moderate the otherwise robust effects of defensive suspicion.

Study one examined whether *multiple trust cues* would provide greater evidence a firm can be trusted through cross-validation. To test this idea, deception was manipulated in an initial advertising study (Darke et al. 2008) and the effects of generalized suspicion were examined in a “different study” concerning the purchase of a used book from a second-party retailer. The brand name (trusted vs. unknown) and the consensus of customer satisfaction ratings (high, average, low) for the retailer were varied in a between subjects design. The results showed that while brand name and high satisfaction ratings alone were ineffective, their combination successfully buffered against generalized suspicion.

Monitoring by regulators is known to be important in maintaining trust in economic exchanges (Pavlou and Gefen 2005). Study two tested whether *regulation* would thwart generalized suspicion in an investment context. Subjects read financial statements from the CEO of an initial firm and half of them were informed these statements were false. Subjects then completed a purportedly unrelated investment game, where they were given financial information from an unrelated firm and could purchase the company’s stock using real money. This financial information was either reported in accordance with Sarbanes-Oxley (SOX), or no mention of SOX was made. Consistent with predictions, fraud induced generalized suspicion and lowered investment when SOX was absent, whereas SOX fully neutralized generalized suspicion.

Study three examined sales promotions. The question was whether an EDLP claim would be less vulnerable to generalized suspicion than a discount claim. Consumers are often highly suspicious of discounts (Fry and McDougall 1974), whereas EDLPs provide a relatively straightforward means of providing good value (Darke and Chung 2005). If so, EDLPs should fit less with stereotypes for deceptive advertising practices, and suspicions should generalize less readily to EDLP versus discount offers. Subjects were exposed to either a discount or EDLP offer on flooring materials and a fake debriefing informed deception subjects the level of savings was overstated. Subjects then completed a filler task, followed by a final study where they indicated the deal value for either an EDLP or discount offer for a television from a second firm. Regardless of its origin (discount or EDLP), deception induced greater suspicious towards the second-party discount offer, whereas it actually led to an increase in the perceived value of the subsequent EDLP offer. That is, advertising deception led to suspicion of discounts in particular, whereas consumers actually became more positive towards the aschematic, no-nonsense of an EDLP.

“A Tale of Two Modes: When Do Consumers Approach or Avoid Persuasion Attempts?”

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David M. Boush, University of Oregon, USA

Lynn R. Kahle, University of Oregon, USA

Peter L. Wright, University of Oregon, USA

Persuasion knowledge does not only consist of schema about an influence agent’s motives and tactics, but also how to respond effectively (Friestad and Wright 1994). In some situations consumers actively approach the salesperson to achieve their goals while others avoid, resist, or withdraw (Kirmani and Campbell 2004). The current study extends previous research by further examining the role of persuasion knowledge and regulatory focus. We predict that consumers are more likely to approach an influence agent when they are promotion-focused to achieve positive outcomes, and more likely to avoid when they are prevention-focused to prevent negative outcomes. Persuasion knowledge moderates the effect of the regulatory fit between consumers’ goals and persuasion situations on coping tendencies.

Study One: We used a 2 (Suspicion: high vs. low) X 2 (Regulatory Focus: prevention vs. promotion) X 2 (Persuasion Knowledge: high vs. low) between-subject design. Participants read a shopping scenario in which a salesperson made positive remarks on his/her choice of a more expensive jacket. Suspicion was manipulated by the timing of positive remarks before or after the purchase decision (Campbell and Kirmani 2000). Regulatory focus was manipulated by priming goals to achieve a positive outcome or avoid a negative outcome (Lockwood, Jordan, and Kunda 2002). Persuasion knowledge was measured independently (Bearden et al. 2001) and tested using a median split. Two dependent measures (approach/avoid tendencies) were adapted from the “sentry vs. seeker” framework (Kirmani and Campbell 2004) based on a factor analysis of eighteen behaviors. The results show that promotion (prevention) focus predicts approach (avoid) tendencies. Also, participants high in persuasion knowledge were less likely to avoid interacting with the salesperson than those low in persuasion knowledge, while persuasion knowledge was not found to regulate approach tendency.

Study Two: We used a 2 (Regulatory Focus: prevention vs. promotion) X 2 (Purchase Relevance: high vs. low) X 2 (Persuasion Knowledge: high vs. low) between-subject design to control for personal relevance in making a purchase. Only the high suspicion condition was retained. Relevance was manipulated by the purpose of the purchase: “...for an important interview” or “...for those just in case times.” The results show that promotion/prevention-focused participants in the high relevance conditions were equally suspicious about the salesperson’s ulterior sales motive. In the low relevance conditions, however, promotion-focused participants were more suspicious than prevention-focused participants. Further, a three-way interaction was evident with regard to the avoidance tendency. For those low in persuasion knowledge, prevention-focused participants were more vigilant when relevance was low. When relevance was high, promotion/prevention focus did not make a significant difference. In comparison, for those high in persuasion knowledge, when relevance was high, prevention-focused participants were more likely to avoid a persuasion attempt. However, when relevance was low, promotion-focused participants were more inclined to act defensively.

Study Three: We used a 2 (Regulatory Focus: prevention vs. promotion) X 2 (Message Framing: positive vs. negative) X 2 (Persuasion Knowledge: high vs. low) between-subject design to further examine the regulatory fit between goals and messages. Only the high suspicion/high relevance conditions were retained.

The salesperson's remarks were framed as positive ("...that's a great jacket. I think it looks very professional, and it will be a good choice for an interview") or negative ("...that's a nice jacket. But I think it looks too casual, and it will not be a good choice for an interview"). In both conditions, the salesperson recommended the more expensive jacket as a better choice. This experiment replicated the findings regarding regulatory focus effect on avoidance tendency. However, no support was found regarding the effect of regulatory fit on suspicion or coping tendencies.

In three experiments, we demonstrated that persuasion knowledge, regulatory focus, and purchase relevance can influence approach/avoid coping tendencies in response to interpersonal marketing persuasion. In particular, promotion-focused consumers can be more vigilant than prevention-focused consumers when the purchase relevance is low. Also, high persuasion knowledge consumers must be motivated enough to simply react against a persuasion attempt.

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Symposium Summary Morality, Suspicion, and Modification: New Directions After 15 Years™ Persuasion Knowledge Research
Session Title Morality, Suspicion, and Modification: New Directions After 15 Years™ Persuasion Knowledge Research Co-Chairs
Guang-Xin Xie (University of Massachusetts Boston) Tracy Rank (DePaul University) Content codes Persuasion Knowledge / Lay
Theories, Communication and Persuasion, Inference Making Method codes Experimental Design, Multivariate Data Analysis Paper 1
Paper 2. After fifteen years of persuasion knowledge research, scholars continue to ask new thought-provoking questions. Theorizing
about persuasion knowledge seems relevant to a number of research domains that interest consumer researchers. We will first
describe the PKM, how persuasion knowledge develops, and how people use that knowledge to refine their attitudes toward products
and marketers. After laying this foundation, we will relate the PKM to past consumer research and explain the model's implications for
the conduct of future research on persuasion and consumer behavior. It is also the case that the persuasion knowledge held by
marketers, advertisers, and salespeople guides their design and design. New insights, new influence strategies, and new facets of persuasion
emerge from a focus on resistance. 3. 4 knowles and Linn. In part, the distinction is driven by methodology, whether the research has
access to the experience or just to the result. Several chapters in this volume employ meta-analyses, where various studies of attitude
change are characterized and compared (Quinn & Wood, this volume; Johnson, Smith-McLallen, Killeya, & Levin, this volume). Effective
persuasion stems from application and not knowledge of speculation. As you read this book, you begin to realize the vast significance of
the knowledge contained herein. Simply skimming through its pages with curiosity enables you to appreciate the techniques and allows
you to apply it in order to empower yourselves and enrich your lives. Indeed this knowledge is priceless. Their research and
information provide priceless insight on the workings of the human psyche. The body of this work draws heavily on the dissertations of
others. Ph.D of Persuasion is simply a condensation of various methodologies of persuasion, influence and seduction—it is by no
means a totally new system.