Implicit Theories: Implications For Consumer Behavior

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My research on implicit theories demonstrates the power of simple beliefs to affect people’s judgments, motivation, and behavior. In this talk, I review past work on implicit theories, present new work (not yet published), and describe the many implications for consumer behavior. Specifically, I will contrast people who believe that human qualities are fixed with people who believe they are malleable, and document differences in their goals (to prove themselves vs. improve themselves) and in their modes of judging others (rapid, rigid judgments vs. gradual, flexible judgments). I show how these differences in goals and judgments translate into consumer behavior.

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personality traits influences their theory on the malleability of product traits. In study 1, they show that incremental theorists are more accepting of brand extensions or repositioning. In study 2, they show that acceptability of a brand extension is based on the implicit theory that the consumer has and not on the number of brand extensions generated. In study 3, they examine boundary conditions for how far incremental theorists are willing to stretch a brand’s traits before they experience a violation of their implicit theory. Their research presents an alternative view to product adoption by suggesting that early versus late product adoption may not be as much a function of risk tolerance as it may be of the implicit theory (incremental or entity) that consumers carry about their personality. Specifically, those with an incremental theory are more willing to adopt new products due to the malleable view they have of product traits.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Implicit Theories: Implications for Consumer Behavior”
Carol S. Dweck, Stanford University

My research on implicit theories has demonstrated the power of simple beliefs to affect people’s judgments, motivation, and behavior. In this talk, I will review past work on implicit theories, I will present new work (not yet published), and I will describe implications for consumer behavior. The implicit theories I have focused on relate to whether individuals believe that human qualities are fixed or malleable. An “entity” theory posits that human traits, such as intelligence or personality, are immutable entities: Each person has a certain amount of intelligence or a certain personality and cannot do much to change it. In contrast, an “incremental” theory rests on the idea that human traits can be developed: Everyone can take measures to increase their intellectual or social abilities.

What is the impact of these implicit theories? The research shows that they affect two broad classes of phenomena. First, implicit theories affect the personal goals people pursue and, second, they affect the judgments and decisions people make about others. I discuss each in turn.

Self-Theories

It has been consistently shown that when people hold an entity theory, their primary goals revolve around proving themselves. In other words, if you only have a fixed amount of competence, then you will be invested in documenting its adequacy. Entity theorists may reject valuable learning opportunities—even at great risk to their future success—if there is a danger of making errors or revealing a deficiency. They may also give up readily in the face of setbacks, worrying that the setback reflects on their ability. In contrast, when people hold an incremental theory, their primary goals revolve around improving themselves. For them it is not about presenting and glorifying, but bettering the self. As a result, they welcome challenges and see errors and setbacks as a natural part of learning.

In several new neurophysiological studies, we monitored people’s brain waves (ERP: event-related potentials) as they worked on a task. We found that entity theorists really harnessed their attention (and showed strong reactions) to information that told them whether their answers had been right or wrong. Once they knew that, they had little interest in further information. In contrast, incremental theorists paid most attention to information that taught them something new.

Perhaps most important, we have shown that implicit theories can be primed or changed—and when they are, motivation and behavior are changed as well. That is, when people are led to believe that an ability can be developed, they become motivated to do so, but when they are led to believe that the ability is carved in stone, they simply want to show they already have it.

Implications of Self-Theories for Consumer Behavior

This work on self-theories has a number of implications for marketing and consumer behavior. First, it suggests that entity theorists are more likely to seek status, popularity, and the appearance of competence through their product purchases—brand names and the status of other product users will matter more to them. In contrast, incremental theorists will seek growth and will favor products that foster self-development. In line with this, the work also suggests that if a product’s appeal will be mostly for entity theorists or for incremental theorists, then messages may be best communicated by inducing an entity or incremental theory mindset at the start of the message. If a product requires a period of learning (as did, for example, the Nordic Track exercise machine), entity theorists may too quickly conclude they are incompetent at it and may reject the product. In short, individuals with different implicit theories are looking for different things, and messages or products that match their mindset will be processed and reacted to preferentially.

Theories About Other People

When people believe that human qualities are fixed, they seek to judge those qualities in others—in other individuals and in other groups. Moreover, they believe that these fixed traits are readily apparent and easy to judge. As a result, entity theorists form rapid judgments—and stereotypes—that are hard to overturn. In contrast, incremental theorists, not believing in fixed traits, form their impressions over time, taking account of the situation and readily updating first impressions in light of new information. Moreover, they are more impressed by people who gain competence over time than those who start off with competence but don’t use it.

New research, for example, shows that entity theorists are far more likely to fall prey to the “fundamental attribution error.” When forming an impression of a new person, they are much less likely to take account of the situation the target person is in and much more likely to think the behavior reflects underlying traits. In contrast, even when under cognitive load, incremental theorists factor the situation into their judgment of the person.

Implications of Theories About Other People for Consumer Behavior

Because entity theorists make rapid and rigid judgments, their first impression of a product or a marketer are paramount. A negative impression will be hard to overcome. However, this also means that once a positive impression has been made, entity theorists may be more loyal to the product and to the marketer. This also suggests that attaching a star, an authority, or a high status individual to a product will affect entity theorists’ judgments more. They will invest these individuals with more credibility than will incremental theorists, and will also desire the products they think these individuals use. More compelling to incremental theorists would be individuals who have stretched, struggled, and overcome obstacles, for it is these people that they hold in higher esteem, and they are likely to attach more credibility to their testimonials.

In summary, implicit theories tell us a great deal about people’s motivation and decision processes, and hold promise of revealing much about consumer behavior.
“Revising Negative Initial Judgments of Salespeople: The Role of Implicit Theories in Overcoming the Perils of Active Listening”

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Harish Sujan, Tulane University
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Consumers often cope with persuasion attempts by careful message and source scrutiny, active counterargumenation, or source derogation. Such coping strategies require the consumer to be an “active recipient” of the persuasive information being presented while attempting to evaluate the persuasion agent. For example, during a retail encounter, a consumer may ask the salesperson questions about the product while simultaneously trying to assess whether the salesperson is trustworthy or is merely trying to make a quick sale. Research on making judgments and judgment revision suggests that when the consumer is an active recipient of the information, versus a passive recipient, the information is more likely to be utilized in making judgments due to greater comprehension and/or elaboration (Greenwald and Leavitt 1984; Petty and Cacioppo 1986). However, there is also research that points to the contrary. Krugman (1965) suggested that actively processing television commercials results in counterargumenation and hence, less persuasion. Gilbert, Pelham, and Krull (1988), in the context of person judgments, demonstrate that counterargumenation is not necessary—even simple active listening (which they argue causes cognitive busyess) results in perceivers lacking the cognitive resources to use the information. More recently, research by Campbell and Kirmani (2000) and Johar and Simmons (2000) also concur with the finding that when cognitive capacity is constrained, it prevents integration of the information in the judgment process, although the information may be encoded.

In this research, we identify contingencies under which cognitive busyess produced by a questioning mindset is indeed debilitating for making accurate judgments on the source of the persuasive message. After establishing that a questioning mindset causes cognitive busyess, impairing the ability to revise initial judgments, we study two further issues: 1) ascertain for which individuials a questioning mindset is indeed debilitating. Specifically, we isolate lay theories of people’s personality change (Dweck 1996) under which cognitive busyess indeed impairs (does not impair) judgment, and 2) examine whether information signals (Lorch Jr. and Lorch 1985) enable judgment revision based on information for those who hold an entity theory of personality change that prevents them from revising.

In the context of a customer-salesperson interaction, we examine consumers’ revision of the initial judgment of a salesperson whose behavior is inconsistent with the initial judgment. In study 1, we establish that a questioning mindset results in cognitive busyess, thereby rendering consumers unable to integrate information pertaining to a negatively stereotyped salesperson’s positive behavior to revise their initial impression of him/her. In study 2, we show that those consumers with an incremental theory of personality (a belief that personality is not static and is changeable) are able to overcome the debilitating effects of cognitive busyess and integrate information on the salesperson’s behavior for judgment revision whereas those with an entity theory (a belief that personality is fixed and difficult to change) are unable to. In this study, we argue that when the initial impression of the salesperson is malleable (incremental theory), judgment revision requires fewer cognitive resources allowing incremental theorists to overcome cognitive busyess to revise their judgment. In study 3, based on research by Lorch Jr. and Lorch (1985) and Plaks et al. (2001), we show that when consumers are provided information signals in the form of pointers for questions to ask the salesperson, it encourages processing the sales pitch and makes the stereotype-inconsistent information explicit, enabling judgment revision even among cognitively busy entity theorists.

In the context of implicit theories, this paper makes two important contributions. First, it has been argued that actively processing persuasive information can result in the lack of integration of the information into judgment (Gilbert, Pelham, and Krull 1988; Johar and Simmons 2000; Krugman 1965). We demonstrate that this depends on the malleability of the initial judgment; when the initial impression is malleable due to an incremental theory of personality, integration is possible. Second, we extend research by Plaks et al. (2001) by demonstrating that when consumers are presented with information signals in the form of pointers for asking questions, even cognitively loaded consumers with an entity theory of personality can integrate information and revise their initial judgments.

“The Role of Implicit Theories in Brand Extendibility”

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For decades, consumer behavior research has devoted attention to the set of human characteristics people associate with brands, such that the construct of brand personality has begun taking on a life of its own. As researchers moved away from the historic conceptualization of the self possessing a stable set of personality traits, support for brand personality theories continued to amass. Recent work now often takes into account the notion of malleable or multiple self concepts. In her work on the self-expressive role of brands, Aaker (1999) argues that different situations lead consumers to evoke different self-schemas that vary in their associated personality traits. While demonstrating how usage situations, brand personality and self-concept interact, Aaker (1999) accepts the brand’s traits as fixed while considering the consumer’s malleable. There is evidence to suggest, however, that consumers make inferences as to the malleability of the brand, suggesting that the traits associated with a particular brand might be more flexible than previously thought.

Research in social psychology supports the notion that people possess lay theories about the malleability of their own personality traits and that these “implicit theories” affect the inferences made when judging the traits of others (Dweck, Chiu, and Hong 1995). Therefore, an individual’s predisposition to view his or her own personality as fixed or malleable as well as external prompting will affect how fixed or malleable the personality of another person, or even a brand extension, is subsequently judged. Accordingly, the ability for a brand to assume the appropriate traits for a particular situation should depend on the consumer’s implicit theory of the self and whether it is fixed or malleable.

In study 1, we find evidence suggesting that one’s implicit theory of the self applies to brand personality such that, the more malleable one sees an individual’s traits, the more likely they are to see a brand as being malleable, reflected in the endorsement of a greater number of brand extensions. The results provide evidence that a brand’s traits can be affected by implicit theories with regards to the fixedness or malleability of one’s traits.

Study 2 demonstrates that the effects of implicit theories affect beliefs about the underlying nature of brands (personality traits) and do not trigger a general belief that things can “change”. In other words, we sought to exhibit how implicit theories operate by affecting beliefs in a brand’s traits just as they affect beliefs in individual’s traits, rather than by affecting beliefs in a brand’s
ability to alter its physicality. In doing so, we reveal how implicit theories, studied exclusively to date in the domain of human personalities, affect how individuals perceive brand personalities. As such, we add to the growing literature on brand personality and offer a new perspective from which to examine the fit of a brand extension.

In study 3, we manipulate rather than measure people’s implicit theories of the self. We find that by activating generalized trait beliefs we can affect how malleable consumers believe brand can be. This has important implications for marketing managers, as persuasive communication can either lead consumers to believe that their brand is more malleable or more fixed with respect to traits.

In study 4, we explore what happens when people’s implicit theories are violated. Plaks, Grant, and Dweck (2005) have found that implicit theory violation creates a “warm state,” wherein individuals are motivated to protect their activated theory in the face of disconfirming evidence. Violations should therefore engender negative attitudes towards the extension that goes too far, as attempts to maintain cognitive consistency between a parent brand and its extension are thwarted. Although incremental theorists are more willing to stretch a brand’s traits than entity theorists, we’ve seen evidence in the first three studies that incremental theorists will not stretch traits indefinitely and too far of a stretch should violate their implicit theory.

This research presents an alternative view to product adoption by suggesting that early versus late product adoption may not be as much a function of risk tolerance as it may be of the implicit theory (incremental or entity) that consumers carry about their personality traits. Specifically, those with an incremental theory are more willing to adopt new products due to the malleable view they have of product traits, in comparison to those with an entity theory.

REFERENCES

References will be made available upon request.
Minority Consumers’ Experiences of Marketplace Discrimination in Services: A Conceptual Model of Antecedents and Customer Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Marketplace discrimination is common in commercial transactions, and is mainly experienced by members of ethnic minorities. However, discrimination can be attributed also to age, gender, physical ability, and sexual orientation. Drawing on Social Identification Theory, marketplace discrimination is conceptualized as an outcome of service employees distinguishing between customers in terms of in-group and out-group members, whereby the latter are perceived more negatively. The aim of this research is to develop a conceptual model that links perceived marketplace discrimination to potential determinants as well as customer outcomes. Based on a review of the literature and depth interviews, specific research propositions are developed that offer insight into the types of discrimination experienced by different minority groups and their coping strategies.

INTRODUCTION

The probability of discrimination in any given service encounter is roughly one to five percent (Siegelman 1998). However, the important question of how consumers perceive and cope with the internal strains produced by discrimination remains an under-investigated topic in service marketing. This study has several goals. First, drawing on Social Identification Theory, we attempt to explain why marketplace discrimination occurs in service-delivery contexts. Second, potential antecedents of discrimination are discussed. Third, we examine which disadvantaged groups experience marketplace discrimination and pay particular attention to consumers with limited physical ability and gay and lesbian consumers. Fourth, based on the review of the literature and the qualitative survey a conceptual model (see Figure 1) is developed that integrates determinants and consequences of marketplace discrimination, and key propositions are suggested.

BACKGROUND

By drawing on Social Identification Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986) it is possible to explain why marketplace discrimination happens. Identification, which can have a powerful influence on behavior, is viewed as the perceived belongingness to a group of which the person is a member, and with which a person identifies. Social identity consists of salient group classifications, usually based on such observable traits as gender, race or demographic categories (Bhattacharya et al. 1995), but can also include factors such as religion, physical ability, and sexual orientation. Social Identity Theory generally suggests that individuals are alert to out-group members and will evaluate in-group members (people perceived as members of the same category as self) with an in-group bias and more positively than out-group members of a different category (Deshpandé et al. 1986). When processing group-related information, people tend to classify others on the basis of their similarities or dissimilarities with the evaluator (i.e., service employee) and thus create an in-group and an out-group when serving customers. Similarly to research on customer outcomes, antecedents of marketplace discrimination have received limited attention. It is likely that two basic types of determinants can cause discrimination, employee- and firm-related determinants. Two types of variables appear relevant in regards to employee-induced customer discrimination, employee attitudes/tolerance and demographics. Firm-related determinants include; an employee’s customer orientation and job satisfaction as well as the existence of service scripts. We suggest the following key antecedents-related propositions.

P1. The more positive attitudes a service employee has toward minority consumers and the more tolerant he/she is, the less likely will he/she engage in discriminatory behavior.

P2. Service employees’ level education is negatively related to customers’ perceived discrimination.

P3. Service employees’ age is positively related to customers’ perceived discrimination.

P4. Service employees’ gender is related to customers’ perceived discrimination, such that female employees are less likely to engage in discriminatory behavior.

P5. Service employees’ customer orientation is negatively related to customers’ perceived discrimination.

P6. Service employees’ job satisfaction is negatively related to customers’ perceived discrimination.

P7. The restrictiveness of service scripts will have a negative impact on customers’ perceived discrimination.

METHOD

Data for the present study were collected through forty depth interviews with consumers from disadvantaged groups (ethnic/immigrants, women, senior consumers, consumers with disabilities, and gay and lesbian consumers). The interviews were conducted from the perspectives of the participants, i.e., had a phenomenological focus (Thompson et al. 1989). During the interview informants were encouraged to talk about as many negative service experiences, that they had experienced first-hand, as they wished. The researchers asked informants to talk about what they thought was intentional and unintentional discrimination. A topic list and interview guideline was created which outlined a broad agenda to be followed during the interview.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

All informants stated that they experienced discrimination at least occasionally. During the interviews informants were also instructed to talk only about coping strategies in relation to perceived discrimination. The individuals interviewed all employed a variety of coping mechanisms. The most common responses were: 1) Ignoring the situation, 2) Formally complain, 3) Decreased satisfaction, 4) Engage in negative word-of-mouth, 5) Decreased trust, and 6) Decreased loyalty.

Through this research, we demonstrate that several disadvantaged groups experience marketplace discrimination in service establishments. Using Social Identification Theory, we argue that service employees perpetrate marketplace discrimination against consumers from minority groups because they view them as dissimilar, and implicitly inferior, to themselves. By exploring potential determinants and identifying consequences of marketplace discrimination through depth interviews we can propose a conceptual model which is shown in Figure 1.

Our conceptual model and the propositions derived from it support the notion that perceived discrimination is a relevant phenomenon. Disadvantaged or minority customers, who experi-
ence marketplace discrimination, will become frustrated and dissatisfied, and take their business to other service firms. An implication of our findings is that service firms need to find means which allow them to identify marketplace discrimination in their organization and to rectify the problem. Service firms could use mystery shopping to find out how well their employees comply with company procedures, ethics policies, and whether they display discriminatory behavior toward minority consumers.

Future research could investigate if our findings can be confirmed across different service types. When we interviewed informants we did not ask them to talk about their experiences in a specific service context. Using a service taxonomy, marketplace discrimination could be examined in low, medium, and high interaction services. This would allow researchers to detect context-specific discrimination. Finally, this study examined only one side of the service employee-customer dyad. All of the findings are based on the self-reported perceptions of the customers. Ideally, service employees would have been questioned to ascertain that their (discriminatory) behavior was deliberate.

REFERENCES
References are available from the authors upon request.

FIGURE 1
Conceptual Model
Brand in the Hand or Sand in the Hand? A Contextualized Account of Adolescents’ Mobile Phone Consumption

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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the movement away from the “solitary subject”, offering a contextualized account of adolescent experiences of mobile phones. It reports on discussions with sixteen small groups, informed by phenomenological principles. The antipathy towards commercial applications suggest that the technology brings marketers no closer to this elusive target. This is attributed to the roles it plays in the social lives of adolescents: to include and exclude, to organise, experience, re-live, and redefine everyday experiences. Young people’s relationships with practitioners were more akin to the elusive “sand in the hand” than the hoped for “brand in the hand”.

INTRODUCTION

The mobile phone has had a profound effect on social behaviour over the last decade (Pedrozo and Wilska 2004), quickly becoming essential to contemporary living. Mobile phone penetration was recently estimated at 89% of all households in the UK (Office of Communications 2005), with almost universal use by adolescents beyond the most deprived of communities (Harper and Hamil 2005). Indeed, by March 2006, there were on average 103 mobile phones in use for every 100 people in Western Europe (Ahonen 2006). Given such high levels of penetration, and the convergence of audio, video, and data services within a single device, Steinbock (2005) echoes the belief of Anssi Vanjoki, executive vice president of Nokia, that mobility will be the “glue” binding different media together. However, consumer acceptance will play at least as significant a role as technological capabilities in shaping the future of mobile communications, and this highlights the need for consumer research in this field. Indeed, as Agnelli et al (2004:1) observe,

“The adoption of mobile communication devices has been as fast as subtle, as radical as invisible: in the past ten years, a number of battery powered devices, unconceivable only a few years before, have come to constitute such an intrinsic part of everybody’s life (at least in first world countries) that it has become difficult to imagine a world without them. The consequences of this worldwide invasion have still to be properly mapped and understood.”

Young people’s consumption of mobile phones merits particularly close attention. Adolescents are highly literate consumers of media and advertising in general (Ritson and Elliott 1999), and have been dubbed the ‘electronic generation’ in light of their considerable exposure to, and consumption of, new forms of media (Buckingham 2002). For these reasons, the ‘youth market’ has become extremely attractive to mobile phone marketers, and mobile phones are increasingly seen as an exciting medium for targeting and interacting with young people (Rohm and Sultan 2005). In this paper, we offer a critical review of existing research in this area, particularly amongst young people, and present findings from an interpretive study of British adolescents’ consumption of mobile phones in the context of their everyday lives.

RESEARCH ON MOBILE PHONE CONSUMPTION

Research to date has largely been influenced by individualistic theories concerning personal demography, lifestyles and motivations for media use; Researchers have sought to link mobile consumption with age (Mante-Meyer and Haddon 2001), gender (Igarashi et al. 2005), social background and technological literacy (Skog 2002), and lifestyle traits (Leung 1998). Studies of user motivations are typically grounded in uses and gratifications theory, assuming a positive mediated experience, and an active, goal directed orientation. Leung and Wei (2000), for example, identified seven gratifications: ‘fashion/status,’ ‘affection/sociability,’ ‘relaxation,’ ‘mobility,’ ‘immediate access,’ ‘instrumentality,’ and ‘reassurance’.

Recent studies into mobile consumption point to more negative consumer experiences, in terms of personal concerns and relationships with external agencies. Problematic issues identified include the potential for increased surveillance and the difficulties of drawing boundaries between spaces for work, leisure and consumption, or between the private and public domains (Dholakia and Zwick 2003; Agnelli et al. 2004). Feelings of anxiety and ambiguity (Moisio 2003) have also been reported, as has irritation at commercial communications (Monk et al. 2004).

Adopting a personal-cognitive perspective, many previous studies of mobile phone consumption fail to acknowledge the wider socio-cultural context of consumption practices (Holt 1995). Indeed, social theorists such as Geertz (1983) have argued that conceptualizing practices as contextualized, local understandings offers a richer understanding of phenomena. Given the nature of mobile phone use, it is surprising how few studies have recognized mobile consumption as contextually influenced, socially constructed and at times contradictory in nature. One exception to this was Moisio (2003), who discussed the irritations, anxieties and ambiguities surrounding mobile consumption.

A contextualized understanding of mobile consumption is increasingly important as mobile devices attract increasing interest from commercial advertisers: mobile interactivity, personalisation and timeliness provide powerful incentives for marketers seeking new forms of engagement with consumers (Rohm and Sultan 2005; Spurgeon 2005). As Morris (2000:49) has observed,

“The old advertising mantra of creating relevant, distinctive and involving messages…was only ever applied to the content of the advertising. In the new media world it will have as much to do with the context of the message and how the connection is made with the target”.

Practitioners and academics seeking to improve advertising media effectiveness have long studied media context (Dahlen 2005). Unfortunately, most studies continue to focus on “the semantic context that surrounds the message rather than the social context in which the reader or viewer (of the advertising message) is located” (Ritson and Elliott 1999:260), privileging the cognitive