Consumer Responses to Flattery: Empirical Evidence of the Sinister Attribution Error

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This research demonstrates that consumers who are flattered are overly suspicious of the motives and intentions of others. Results across two studies, one a field study, demonstrated that consumers who were flattered prior to purchase accurately adjusted for the presence of ulterior motives and responded negatively to flattery. In contrast, consumers who were flattered after purchase over accounted for the possibility of ulterior motives and responded more negatively than was warranted by the situation. This research serves as some of the first empirical evidence of the sinister attribution error in marketing.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The current research used an attributional framework to investigate questions relating to the effectiveness of flattery in consumer settings. Attribution theory’s discounting principle suggests that consumers are likely to accurately discount flattery for the presence of plausible ulterior motives in the situation (such as trying to make a sale). This discounting would result in a negative reaction from consumers as they discount flattery for the presence of plausible ulterior motives in a sales setting. However, an emerging concept in the attribution literature suggests another potential consumer reaction to flattery. Kramer (1994) discussed a sinister attribution error where individuals are overly suspicious of the motives and intentions of others and assume a lack of trustworthiness (Kramer 1994). In a sales setting, consumers whose judgments are influenced by the sinister attribution error would react negatively to flattery based on the assumption of possible ulterior motives such as trying to influence the sale, regardless of the validity of the assumption or the plausibility of those motives.

Two experiments, a field study and scenario study, examined consumer reactions to flattery when there was an obvious ulterior motive present (i.e. the salesclerk flattered prior to the purchase decision) or when there was no obvious ulterior motive (i.e. flattery occurred after the purchase decision). The results of the field study demonstrated that consumers make less of a distinction between flattery before and after purchase in a real shopping situation. The distinction as to when flattery occurred was subtle in this real purchase context and consumers responded based on the presence or absence of flattery as opposed to when it occurred. It was flattery that became a salient cue in the situation to consumers, and their reactions to flattery were primarily negative. Consumers who were flattered prior to purchase perceived the clerk as less trustworthy and reported more negative attributional thoughts than consumers flattered after purchase. The results for flattery before purchase suggest that consumers accurately detected the fact that the flattery might plausibly serve as an ulterior motive, and this identification of an ulterior motive resulted in distrust. What has not been previously demonstrated in the literature is the fact that even flattery occurring after purchase resulted in negative perceptions of the seller when compared to consumers who were not flattered at all. Consumers flattered after purchase experienced more negative reactions than were warranted by the situation. This finding serves as evidence of the sinister attribution error (Kramer 1998) given that consumers were overly suspicious of flattery and failed to take into account when the flattery occurred in the situation.

In the scenario study, once again, perceptions of the clerk’s trustworthiness were lowest in the flattery before purchase condition and consumers who were flattered after purchase still perceived the clerk as significantly less trustworthy than consumers who were not flattered at all. An accurate consumer would not respond in this manner, as they should recognize that attempting to make a sale is an implausible ulterior motive when flattery occurs after the purchase has been completed. This finding suggests that consumers were overly suspicious of flattery from the clerk and overcorrected for the possibility of ulterior motives. For attributional thoughts, results demonstrated that consumers flattered after purchase experienced more negative attributional thoughts than consumers who were not flattered. The results suggest that consumers experienced perceptions of ulterior motives and negative thoughts about the causes of flattery both when flattery occurred before purchase and even when flattery occurred afterwards. Further analysis suggested that attributional thoughts mediated perceptions of the trustworthiness of the clerk, depending on when the flattery occurred. For consumers who were flattered prior to purchase, perceptions of the clerk’s trustworthiness were mediated by more thoughtful and effortful attributional processing. Consumers who had more negative attributional thoughts (such as believing that the clerk was working on commission) had lower perceptions of the clerk’s trustworthiness. In contrast, if consumers made positive attributes for flattery (such as the clerk being helpful), perceptions of the clerk’s trustworthiness were higher. For consumers who were flattered after purchase, mediation results were not significant and demonstrated that perceptions of the clerk’s trustworthiness were made automatically. Overall, this analysis demonstrates that consumers’ judgments of the clerk’s trustworthiness were made both automatically and consciously.

When we examine the findings of the current research in comparison to those previously reported, there was a partial replication. In particular, the negative reactions of consumers who were flattered before purchase were consistent between the current research and that of Campbell and Kirmani (2000), and serve as evidence that consumers were able to adequately use persuasion knowledge in determining potential explanations for flattery received in a consumer context. Consumers who were flattered before purchase were able to discount appropriately for the presence of ulterior motives in the sales situation. With the addition of a group of consumers who did not receive flattery, the results for flattery after purchase become clearer. Results confirmed that consumers make fairly sinister attributions for influence tactics used in sales settings. Instead of recognizing that there are no plausible ulterior motives for flattery after purchase, consumers responded just as negatively to this flattery as they did to flattery received before purchase. Consistent with other research (Kramer 1994), consumers exhibited an irrational suspicion that they were the target of an influence attempt and made sinister attributions for the flattery.

The results of this research make a number of contributions to the literature. First, it is one of only a few papers to investigate consumer behavior within an attributional framework, answering repeated calls for research in this area (see Weiner 2000). Second, this research is one of the first to demonstrate empirical evidence of the sinister attribution error (Kramer 1999a), and the only to apply this concept to a consumer setting. Third, this research has demonstrated that it is not just the presence of ulterior motives that influences interpretations of flattery, but rather it is the sales situation itself, regardless of the implausibility of ulterior motives, that was partially responsible for consumer reactions to flattery.

REFERENCES


