Special Session Summary  Self-Generated Validity Effects in Consumer Research

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SESSION SUMMARY

Self-Generated Validity Effects in Consumer Research

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In 1988, Feldman and Lynch proposed the self-generated validity effect, namely that the act of measuring beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors can change the strength of the relationship between them. This seminal paper has had a large influence on consumer research in a wide variety of domains. The purpose of this session was to present recent research on self-generated validity effects in consumer research. Together these papers demonstrate the scope and consequences of self-generated validity effects, posit and provide evidence for different psychological processes underlying these effects, and outline the limiting conditions for these effects.

In this special session, we had three papers that addressed different aspects, and provided distinct perspectives reflecting on self-generated validity effects in consumer behavior. The session also brought together studies employing various empirical and methodological techniques. The first paper by Chandon et al. analyzed data from three large field studies and demonstrated that measuring purchase intentions not only changes behavior, but also increases the strength of the relationship between latent intentions (i.e., intentions respondents would have whether or not they are surveyed) and subsequent behavior. This paper also proposed a new methodology for detecting self-generated validity effects. The second paper by Dholakia et al. examined self-generated validity effects in a different domain, namely satisfaction surveys. Past research on measurement effects suggested that these effects are caused by increased attitude accessibility induced by the measurement task. In contrast, using a field experiment, this paper posits and finds evidence for a new, competing explanation for self-generated validity effects, namely that responding to a firm-sponsored satisfaction survey increases the positivity of respondent cognitions, leading to more positive behavior, even for respondents with low reported satisfaction levels. Further this paper shows that firm-related experience moderates this positivity effect, with the effect being greatest for less experienced consumers. The third paper by Levav and Fitzsimons investigated the role of representation in behavioral intent questions. The authors presented evidence suggesting that intent questions may affect behavior through an additional mechanism: mental representation and simulation of the behavior. This was shown by varying the extent to which the intent question facilitates a mental representation, while holding attitude accessibility constant.

By including research that used large-scale field studies involving real consumers in the market place over relatively long-time horizons, and research that used laboratory experiments to test rigorously competing theoretical explanations, this session provided a broad perspective on self-generated validity effects. The session also demonstrated that self-generated validity effects have important consequences for academic researchers, firms that design marketing research surveys, and managers who utilize them.

John Lynch was the discussion leader for this session. John pioneered research on self-generated validity effects (Feldman and Lynch 1988), and thus had a unique perspective for discussing these papers and leading a discussion about an appropriate research agenda for continued work in this area. John was one of the winners of the prestigious American Marketing Association Paul D. Converse Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Science of Marketing in 2004. His self-generated validity paper (with Feldman) was one of two papers especially mentioned in the award.

LONG ABSTRACTS

“The Self-Generated Validity of Measured Purchase Intentions”

Pierre Chandon, INSEAD
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Werner J. Reineartz, INSEAD

Because they are an easy-to-collect proxy of behavior, consumers’ self-reported intentions have been widely used in academic and commercial research. Because purchase intentions are only an imperfect and biased indicator of actual purchasing, a large body of research has been devoted to improving their predictive accuracy by modeling response biases, the stochastic nature of intentions and behavior, and nonlinearities in the functional forms linking them (Bemmoar 1995; Hsiao, Sun, and Morwitz 2002; Jamieson and Bass 1989; Juster 1966; Kalwani and Silk 1982; Manski 1990; Mittal and Kamakura 2001; Morrison 1979). Yet, these studies have focused on internal accuracy—the ability to forecast the behavior of consumers whose intentions were previously measured—rather than external accuracy—the ability to forecast the behavior of consumers whose intentions were not measured. In doing so, they have ignored the potentially important problem that some of the association between the intentions and behavior of the same consumer might be caused by the measurement of intentions itself, a phenomenon called self-generated validity (Feldman and Lynch 1988).

Research in psychology and in marketing has already shown that measuring purchase intentions for a product category increases purchase incidence, influences brand choice, and leads to persisting gains in terms of customer profitability for the firm (Chandon, Morwitz, and Reineartz 2004; 2005; Dholakia and Morwitz 2002; Fitzsimons and Morwitz 1996; Morwitz, Johnson, and Schmittlein 1993; Sherman 1980; Spangenberg et al. 2003). However, these studies have all focused on the direct effect of measuring intentions on future behavior, a set of related phenomena that have been called mere-measurement, the self-erasing error of prediction, or self-prophecy. None of these studies has directly examined the interactive effect of measuring purchase intentions on the association between (latent) intentions and behavior—the self-generated validity effects.

The objectives of this research were (1) to offer a method for simultaneously measuring mere-measurement and self-generated validity effects and (2) to apply this method to test Feldman and Lynch’s prediction that measuring purchase intentions increases the association between latent intention and behavior. To achieve these goals, we developed a latent model relating measured intent, latent intent, intent measurement, and future behavior and showed that it could be estimated via two-stage least squares. We used this method to empirically test for self-generated validity effects using data from three large-scale studies of three different products and services: online grocery purchases, automobiles, and personal computers. Each study contained information on purchasing and/or customer profitability for a group of consumers whose purchase intentions were measured as well as for a group of similar consum-
ers whose purchased intentions were not measured. The first study relies on data from a field study where customers are randomly assigned to the survey or no-survey control group, and the latter two use data from two field quasi-experiments, where because random assignment was not used, other methods are used to ensure comparability between the survey and control groups.

The results demonstrate that, as has been shown in past studies, measuring intent increases purchase incidence. Further, measuring purchase intentions does not simply slightly increase future purchasing behavior; it reduces the variance in purchasing behavior and, more importantly, it strongly influences the association between latent intent and future purchasing behavior. Specifically the results show that purchasing and customer profitability are higher in the survey group than in the control group for high or moderate intenders but are lower in the survey group than in the control group for low intenders.

Overall, these results show that analyses measuring intentions and behavior on the same sample of consumers not only overstate purchase probabilities, but also overstate the strength of the association between intentions and behavior. These results have implications for measurement reactivity research and for survey research in general. The method offered in this research can be used to help measure and correct for self-generated validity effects in survey research. For example, this method could be applied to shed light on areas showing inconsistencies between survey results and the behavior of the general population, such as contingent valuation surveys for environmental policies or products (Irwin 1999). This method could also be used to examine the consequences and antecedents of latent, as opposed to measured satisfaction. In particular, estimating the association between latent satisfaction and customer lifetime value for non-surveyed consumers as well as for surveyed consumers would contribute to the debate on the value of improving customer satisfaction (Bolton 1998; Kamakura et al. 2002). More generally, we believe that any surveys that go beyond pure descriptions but intend to examine the association between constructs might benefit from testing for both mere-measurement and self-generated validity effects using the method described in this research.

“A Survey Participation Effects on Customer Purchase Behavior: Increased Judgment Accessibility or Positivity?”

Utpal M. Dholakia, Rice University
Vicki G. Morwitz, New York University
Robert A. Westbrook, Rice University

Self-generated validity theory suggests that survey participation and measurement may itself trigger changes in the attitudes, intentions and behavior being studied. Furthermore, recent research has observed its impact on behavior to be pervasive and long-lasting (Dholakia and Morwitz 2002) The question remains, from a theoretical perspective, how can such persistent and broad-based changes occur in customer behavior following such transient stimulus exposure, i.e. a single instance of participation in a relatively short firm-sponsored customer satisfaction survey? Past research (Morwitz and Fitzsimons 2004; Fitzsimons and Williams 2000) suggests the explanation lies in increased accessibility. That is, expressing one’s judgment increases its accessibility in memory afterward, leading to behavior that is consistent with the expressed judgment. However, these investigations have been limited to laboratory settings where the mere measurement effect occurs within minutes of judgment elicitation. Furthermore, these studies have not been undertaken with a particular firm’s existing customers, nor have they considered the impact of firm sponsorship of the survey.

A second explanation consistent with self-generated validity theory but yet unconsidered by mere-measurement researchers is that participation in a firm-sponsored survey itself conveys favorable information about the firm to the customer. Such information may lead the customer to form positive cognitions regarding the firm, e.g. the firm values my opinions, is making a bona fide effort to please me, is caring and concerned about customers in general, etc., which may then have a directive influence on the participant’s behaviors. Such an explanation seems especially plausible for marketing research surveys where the firm first identifies itself as the survey’s sponsor before obtaining customers’ judgments, as is the case with most satisfaction surveys.

In this research we tested whether and when mere measurement effects are due to accessibility or positivity effects. To do so, we relied on observed behavioral differences between an experimental group of customers whose satisfaction was measured, and a control group of customers whose satisfaction was not measured. Both the increased judgment accessibility and the positivity effects predict that respondents in the experimental group who have high satisfaction ratings should engage in a greater extent as well as more forms of customer purchasing behavior, compared to customers in the control group. The increased judgment accessibility explanation makes this prediction since the high satisfaction levels of participants will become more accessible to them, directing their behavior relative to the firm accordingly. The positivity effect makes a similar prediction by suggesting that these survey participants will form even greater positive cognitions regarding the firm based on the survey, which in turn will have a positive influence their subsequent purchase behaviors.

However, the predictions made by the two explanations for customers expressing low satisfaction levels in the survey differ. The increased judgment accessibility explanation predicts that survey participants with low satisfaction levels should engage in less intense as well as fewer forms of purchase behavior, compared to the control group. This is because the negative judgment expressed in the survey should become more accessible to such low-satisfaction respondents, directing their subsequent behaviors. In contrast, the positivity effect predicts the opposite, namely, more behaviors toward the firm when compared to the control group, because the survey leads them to create positive firm related cognitions.

We used data from a longitudinal field experiment conducted by an automotive services industry firm, within the context of its ongoing customer satisfaction measurement program. We explicitly studied the behavioral differences between a group of survey participants and an equivalent control group of non-participants over the course of a year following survey participation. In addition to measures of service purchase and use, we examined the influence of survey participation on customers’ responsiveness to an important firm-initiated sales initiative, namely coupon-based promotions. Finally, we examined the moderating role played by customer experience level in the subsequent behaviors of survey participants.

The findings from this study provided consistent evidence across a number of measures of purchase behavior for a positivity effect in the aggregate. The findings also indicated that whether increased judgment accessibility or the positivity effect explains the influence of survey participation on purchase behavior depends on the level of firm-specific experience possessed by the customer. When customers have high levels of firm-specific experience, our results indicate that the influence of survey participation on purchase behavior appears to occur primarily because of enhanced accessibility of their expressed judgments. In contrast, for customers with low levels of firm-specific experience, the effect appears...
to be driven primarily by positive cognitions resulting from survey participation. These differences imply that devising effective means to mitigate such influences will depend on the extent of firm-specific experience of the customers participating in the survey.

“The Role of Representation in Behavioral Intent Questions”
Jonathan Levav, Columbia University
Gavan Fitzsimons, Duke University

Past research on the “mere-measurement effect” has demonstrated that simply assessing people’s intention to engage in a positively- (negatively-) viewed behavior increases (decreases) the probability of the behavior taking place. This phenomenon has been explained by desire for consistency (Sherman 1980) and attitude accessibility (Feldman and Lynch 1988; Morwitz and Fitzsimons 2004). In this paper we tested the role of representation in the mere-measurement effect, and found that the ease with which respondents are able to simulate the behavior in question may play an important role.

In multiple experiments we designed treatment conditions in which either attitude accessibility or need for consistency were held constant (or both), but mental representation was manipulated. In experiment 1 we compared three conditions: control, intent-of-self, and intent-of-other. The target behavior was flossing, and participants were executive MBA students enrolled in a marketing course. In the control condition participants were asked their likelihood of reading for pleasure in the next two weeks. In the intent-of-self condition they were asked their likelihood of flossing in the next week. Finally, in the intent-of-other condition they were asked to report an average classmate’s likelihood to floss his or her teeth. Both experimental conditions held attitude accessibility constant. However, we conjectured that the intent-of-self condition would facilitate a mental representation of the participant flossing. This mental representation would appear less self-relevant and more difficult—after all, flossing is a private behavior—in the intent-of-other question. Two weeks following the intent question participants were asked to recall the number of times they had flossed in the past fourteen days. As expected, participants in the intent-of-self condition flossed more times in the intervening fourteen days than either participants in the control condition or intent-of-other condition (the latter were slightly higher than controls).

In experiment 2 we manipulated ease of representation using negations, as well as obtain actual behavioral data rather than self reports. Undergraduate students participated in this experiment as part of a series of unrelated experiments. In the beginning of the session they were asked to complete a seemingly innocuous market research questionnaire that asked them about various shopping habits and store preferences. At the end of the questionnaire they were asked about the target behavior, eating fatty foods. The question was asked in one of three ways. The intent condition asked participants for their likelihood of consuming fatty foods in the coming week. The unnatural negation condition asked participants how likely they were not to eat fatty foods. Finally, the natural negation condition asked participants how likely they were to avoid fatty foods. After a one hour unrelated filler task, participants were instructed to participate in a taste test. They entered a separate room, and were shown two products: mini-rice cakes, and mini-chocolate chip cookies. They were told to taste and evaluate one of the products. Williams, Fitzsimons and Block (2004) show that when participants are asked a question about a negative behavior, the intent question leads to a decrease in the behavior. Therefore, we expected participants in the intent condition to be less likely to eat cookies than control condition participants. In the unnatural negation condition we expected participants to exhibit the same likelihood to eat cookies as their intent condition counterparts. Johnson-Laird et al. (1999) argue that people’s perceptions of the world or “imagined states of affairs” are represented in mental models that comprise of what is true in a possibility (“the truth principle”), but not its negation—people simply do not mentally construe negations. Therefore, we conjectured that the unnatural negation condition would not facilitate a representation and mental simulation of avoidant behavior because the intentions question would either be spontaneously re-coded into a true statement or simply serve to increase the accessibility of attitudes about fatty foods, just as in the intent condition. In contrast, the natural negation was expected to lead to a strong avoidant tendency, and a steep decrease in cookie consumption. Our results confirmed our expectations. Whereas nearly all (92%) participants in the control condition chose to eat the cookies, this dropped equally in both the intent (68%) and unnatural negation conditions (65%). In the natural negation condition, where a representation of avoidant behavior was facilitated by the problem wording, this propensity fell much more dramatically (38%).

In sum, our findings thus far suggest that the mere measurement effect is due, at least in part, to people’s ability to form a mental representation and simulation of the behavior in question. In conditions where the ability to form such a representation is hampered, the mere-measurement effect is attenuated. Note that we do not suggest this simulation be elaborative; rather, it may be the case that this representation and simulation occurs virtually automatically. Further research into the effect of personality variables and regularity of the behavior in question is currently being conducted.

REFERENCES


