The Devil You Know: Effects of Suspicion of an Information Source's Identity

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The proliferation of the Internet provides a new integrated forum for consumers’ search activities and decision making. This new environment, especially consumer boards and chatrooms, may make it difficult for consumers to assess self-interest. A preliminary study finds consumers less likely to use a chatroom source in making a buying decision than a salesperson in the store, another customer’s testimonial, and an online buying guide. Suspicions of the credibility of the source and the possibility of an imposter marketer provide some clues as to why a seemingly trustworthy, non-marketer source would be viewed more negatively than a known marketer source.

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The sheer number of information sources available for search and choice comparisons has exploded with technology. With the growth of “buzz marketing” and organized “word-of-mouth” tactics such as “alpha pups” and “leaners,” marketers are intentionally using strategies to influence consumers that mask their true identity. As a result, the lines between marketer and non-marketer controlled are increasingly blurred. Without knowing the identity of the source, consumers may have problems assessing self-interest, and in turn, may discount credibility and recommendations. Rather than “gaining” the credibility often attributed to true word-of-mouth sources, Fein (1996) suggests that, when suspicion is raised, the “individual actively entertains multiple plausible rival hypotheses about the motives and genuineness of a person’s behavior” (p. 1165).

Sources explicitly identified as marketers may allow confident attributions of intent, and consumers can then factor such self-interest into their decision-making. Information provided by sources with expected self-interests in certain outcomes may naturally evoke coping mechanisms based on their persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994). In personal sales contexts, perceived self interest has been shown to moderate the effectiveness of argument strength and perceived expertise (Wiener, LaForge, and Goolsby 1990). Sources appearing in identified “consumer” web forums would be expected to be judged synonymously with other forms of non-marketer controlled sources. If a posting in a web forum, is suspected to be authored by a marketer, instead of being viewed like other identified marketing sources, the suspicion of deception may result in even more negative thoughts than self-interested sources because of uncertainty.

The purpose of this study was to examine the willingness to rely on persuasive sources which vary on identified self-interests across traditional and web-based forums. Specifically, we examine the effects of suspicion of self-interested motives on perceived credibility of the sources and likelihood of relying on them for advice.

Method
An online survey presented a purchase scenario. Respondents were asked to imagine they planned to buy a digital camera as a gift. Though they had identified four models of camera in their price range, they were told that they could not discriminate between them so they sought additional input. Four sources of information were described (abbreviated descriptions below):

A **salesperson at a large electronics store** has gone through extensive training on digital cameras in addition to 15 years experience in the business.

A **website’s Buying Guide** has ads for electronics companies and direct links to various retailers. Its Buying Guide lets you identify up to five products and it provides a “best in class” recommendation.

A **customer in the store** who overhears your conversation and offers personal testimony about his recent camera purchase since he’d looked at the same four models.

A **person in a chatroom** who says he has 15 years of business experience with all types of cameras and experience with the four specific cameras in question.
The respondent was told that each source recommends a different camera so they will have to make a decision based solely on the sources since they must buy the gift immediately.

Each source was then rated on their expertise, believability, trustworthiness and interest in helping them make the best choice on a nine-point scale. They were then asked which recommendation they would be most likely and least likely to take. For the latter, they were asked why they would be least likely to follow this recommendation.

Results
Respondents were 140 undergraduate students. The sample was 54.1% female and 90.1% spent four or more hours per week on the internet.

In terms of interest in helping the customer to make the best decision, the chatroom advisor was rated statistically significantly lower (mean=5.09) than all three other sources (Customer=6.63, Web Guide=6.01, Salesperson=6.04), confirming expectations that suspicion led to lower ratings than those with admitted self-interest. While the salesperson and chatroom advisor were described as having equivalent expertise experience, the chatroom advisor was rated statistically lower (mean=5.48) on expertise than the salesperson (mean=6.81), and was even statistically lower than the store customer (mean=5.90) or the Buying Guide (mean=6.47).

When asked whose recommendation they would most likely take, 31.4% said the website buying guide and 30.0% said the customer, while 25.7% said the electronics’ salesperson. In terms of the recommendation they would be least likely to take, 51.4% said the chatroom advisor. The verbatims for those respondents showed that 68% of the responses doubted the chatroom advisor’s credibility, some expressing the need to see advisors face-to-face to be able to judge their credibility. Another 11% suggested that the person probably worked for the manufacturer. Interestingly 12% saw the recommendation as part of a possible joke, prank or fraud.

This provides some limited support to Fein’s arguments about the effects of suspicion. Consumers seem to be suspicious of sources who may be concealing their true identity and therefore their self-interest, rating them lower than self-interested sources.

This study suggests that marketers should proceed with caution in using online forums. Consumers are becoming more sophisticated in these forums where identity is less verifiable, leading to suspicion. The very “hint” of deceit may be sufficient to elicit significant consumer backlash. The heyday of marketers being able to “masquerade” as consumers to gain greater influence and avoid coping strategies may be past. The suspicion in this study seemed to be limited to the online forums.

References

Product Placement: Developing Concepts, Constructs and Measures
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Product placement practice has grown in scope and volume, and expenditure now exceeds one billion dollars per annum. Publicity and public concern is also increasing. Placement research however has not kept pace with these trends. Effects-based research is minimal and findings across studies diverge. Most researchers have adopted traditional advertising effect measures, however placement is qualitatively different to interruptive advertising. Whilst theoretical discussion is ensuing, it remains minimal. Before viable research can emerge, sound concepts and constructs must be developed. This paper presents a discussion and resolution of conceptual issues.

The Effect of Perceived Brand Name–Logo Coherence on Brand Attitudes
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Extended Abstract
This research investigates how the perceived coherence between brand name and logo affects brand attitudes and how this relationship is influenced by consumer-level and marketer-controlled variables (Keller, 1993, 1998). The topic is an important one since brand names and logos are common means to communicate brand identity to consumers (Aaker 1996; Henderson and Cote 1998). However, if these brand elements are incoherent, incongruity may occur at the brand association level (Keller 1993). Therefore, the coherence between brand name and logo is crucial to the development of a strong brand identity. Even though the coherence between brand names and their logos has been recognized as an important research topic, little systematic research has investigated it yet (Henderson and Cote 1998; Henderson, Giese, and Cote 2003; Klink 2003).

The purpose of this research is to study a main effect (the impact of brand name-logo coherence on brand attitudes), its potential moderators and its boundary conditions. To do so, the primary theoretical frameworks we rely on are Keller’s (1993) consumer-based