If I Want You to Like Me, Should I Be Like You Or Unlike You? the Effect of Prior Positive Interaction With a Group on Conformity and Distinctiveness in Consumer Decision-Making

Veronika Papyrina, San Francisco State University

The extant research points to conflicting results regarding social influence in consumer decision-making. On the one hand, there is empirical evidence which suggests that people conform to other members of their groups. On the other hand, several studies demonstrated the opposite pattern, namely, that individuals seek distinctiveness from others in the group. The goal of the present research is to reconcile these contradictory findings. To this end, I propose that whether a person will conform to or seek distinctiveness from others in a particular consumption situation is contingent on the absence or presence of one’s prior positive interaction with the group. I also suggest that this effect will occur in a public context, that is, when an individual’s choice is visible to other group members. The results of experiment supported these propositions.

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If I Want You to Like Me, Should I Be Like You or Unlike You? The Effect of Prior Positive Interaction with a Group on Conformity and Distinctiveness in Consumer Decision-Making

Veronika Papyrina, San Francisco State University, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The extant research points to contradictory findings regarding social influence in consumer decision-making. On the one hand, there is empirical evidence which suggests that consumers conform to other members of their groups. For example, Venkatesan (1966) presented participants with three identical men’s suits and asked them to choose the best suit individually or in the presence of three confederates who uniformly pointed to the target suit. Consistent with the notion of conformity, participants followed the responses of confederates and selected the target suit more often in the group rather than in the individual condition. On the other hand, several more recent studies demonstrated the opposite effect, namely, that individuals seek distinctiveness in the presence of others. For example, Ariely and Levav (2000) examined the sequential choices of people in a small group setting and showed that every next person in a group tried to select something different from what other individuals before him or her had chosen.

The goal of the present research is to reconcile these conflicting results. To this end, I propose that whether a person will conform to or seek distinctiveness from others in a particular consumption situation is contingent on the absence or presence of one’s prior positive interaction with the group. I also suggest that this effect will occur in a public context, that is, when an individual’s choice is visible to other group members.

Theoretical arguments for the above relationship build on the idea that people are driven by two fundamental and equally strong motives—the desire to belong with others and the desire to be unique. The main proposition, which is based on the Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer 1991), is that these two motives compete with each other in a such way that satisfaction of the former activates the latter, and vice versa. More specifically, I suggest that when individuals do not have an experience of prior positive interaction with the group, they will be more likely to conform. The rationale for this proposition is that on such occasions the need to belong is not yet satisfied, and individuals will be motivated to gain approval by and to create a common identity with the group by choosing the same brands and/or products as other group members. And alternatively, I expect that when individuals already have a history of positive relationships with the group, they will be more likely to seek distinctiveness from other members because in this situation the need to be unique will take precedence over the need to belong.

The results of experiment yielded support for the interaction effect of prior positive interaction with the group and visibility of one’s consumption decision to others on conformity and distinctiveness. Specifically, I found that individuals were more likely to follow the preferences of other group members when they believed that others would become aware of their consumption decisions yet they did not have a history of positive relationships with the group. As predicted, the pattern of results was reversed after people experienced positive interaction with other members of their group. In this situation, individuals were more likely to make choices which allowed them to stand out of the group rather than choices which signified conformity to others. Consistent with expectations, no evidence was found for the relationship between prior positive interaction with the group and either conformity or distinctiveness in the context of private consumption decisions.

References


A Psychophysiological Perspective of the Stress-buffering and Persuasive Impact of Positive Communication Style

Zhenfeng Ma, University of Ontario Institute of Technology, Canada
Laurette Dubé, McGill University, Canada

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers’ search for health information is often prompted by their personal encounter with health threat. At the time when consumers resort to health information, they are often under considerable stress. Thus, health communicators must strive to alleviate stress while at the same time maximize persuasive impact. In this study we look at the stress-buffering and persuasive impact of positive communication style, via the use of positive peripheral pictures, on consumers facing health threat. Different from prior studies, we used a psychoneuroendocrine (PNE) model of stress, which views stress as an integrated process that involves affective, autonomic and endocrine changes. The PNE approach allows us not only to examine the role of positive communication style in alleviating both psychological and physiological stress reactivity but also to uncover the psychophysiological mechanisms underlying the persuasive effect of positive communication style.

Studies from positive psychology suggest that for individuals under stress, positive stimuli have the potential to alleviate psychological and physiological stress reactivity. Based on the PNE model of stress, we hypothesize that for consumers who have undergone a health threat, health communication presented in a positive style by using positive peripheral pictures will reduce psychological distress, and autonomic and endocrine reactivity than health communication presented in a neutral manner (H1).

Research evidence suggests that people under stress concurrently engage in two modes of coping, that is, approach and avoidance. Approach coping represents a cognitive and emotional orientation toward threat or threat-related information, whereas avoidance coping represents an orientation away from threat or related information. Research has shown that positive stimuli and its ensuing positive affect can broaden one’s thoughts and actions repertoire and facilitate cognitive processing of potentially threatening information. We thus hypothesize that for consumers facing health threat, positive communication style will lead to better persuasive outcome than neutral communication style (H2). We further hypothesize that the impact of positive communication style on consumers under stress will be mediated by changes in affective and physiological responses. Specifically, when communication is presented in a neutral style, the unmitigated psychophysiological responses will have negative impacts on persuasion. However, when the same information is presented in a positive style via positive peripheral pictures, the negative impact of psychophysiological reactivity will be attenuated (H3).

Hypotheses were tested through a 2 (stress condition: stress vs. no stress) x 2 (communication style: positive vs. neutral) between-subject design. Eighty healthy women from the local community participated in the study. Participants first preformed a mental imagery task, which was used to manipulate stress, and then a web-browsing task, which was used to manipulate communication style. In both tasks, autonomic responses were continuously measured. Mood and endocrine responses were measured three times: before the imagery task, between the imagery and the web-browsing tasks, and after the web-browsing task. Finally, the persuasive impact of health communication was measured using a self-administered questionnaire.

Stress was manipulated using a guided mental imagery task which pertains to health-related scenarios: osteoporosis prevention (the no-stress condition) and a mammogram screening procedure (the stress condition). In the stress condition, participants were led to imagine, with the aid of computed-mediated instructions and audio-visual cues, detecting a suspicious lump in the breast, going through a mammogram screening procedure and finally reaching the point of waiting for screening results. In the no-stress condition, participants imagined several low-risk scenarios such as paying a routine visit to the physical therapist and engaging in mild exercise.

Communication style was manipulated through a consumer health information website, which offers information and recommendations on various healthy lifestyle behaviors. The positive communication style was operationalized by embedding non-content-related background color pictures of natural scenery on the periphery of the webpage. These pictures had been pre-tested to elicit positive affect relative to neutral stimuli. In the neutral communication style condition, the same information was presented without using peripheral pictures. Except for the presence/absence of pictures, the information and recommendations in both conditions were identical in all other aspects.

Psychological responses were measured using the short form of the Profile of Mood States (POMS-SF). Following standard scoring procedure we calculated an index of negative mood and an index of positive mood. Autonomic responses were measured using a computer-based physiological data acquisition system. Two measures of autonomic response were derived: skin conductance level (SCL) and heart rate variability (HRV). Endocrine response was indexed by salivary cortisol. Persuasive impact was measured in terms of attitude toward the health communication.

The analysis shows that compared with health information communicated in a neutral style, information presented in a positive style alleviated psychological, autonomic and endocrine stress reactivity. Thus H1 was supported. Moreover, for stressed consumers the positive communication style also induced superior acceptance of the persuasive messages, thereby supporting H2. A further look at the PNE mechanisms suggests that for stressed consumers, the positive communication style increased the persuasive impact relative to the neutral style by changing the nature of the effect of PNE responses on persuasion. Specifically, for stressed consumers the PNE reactivity had negative effects on persuasion when the information is presented in a neutral style, but a positive impact on persuasion when the same information is presented in a positive style. These findings supported H3.

Although the stress-buffering influence of positive stimuli is not new to researchers, it is the first time that we observed such an influence in a communication context. Perhaps more importantly, our findings shed light on the underlying psychophysiological mechanisms of the persuasive impact of positive peripheral cues. Our findings show that affective, autonomic and endocrine changes during exposure to communication each uniquely mediated the persuasive impact of positive communication style. These findings suggest that an exclusive focus on psychological aspect of stress experience, as is typical of current literature, may have neglected important mechanisms underlying attitudinal change under stress.