Fear and Loving in Las Vegas: When Fundamental Motives Lead Basic Persuasion Heuristics to Backfire

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How are persuasion heuristics influenced by arousal-inducing contexts such as TV programs? A general arousal model predicts similar effects for all arousing content; an affect model predicts opposite effects for content eliciting positive versus negative affect; a functional evolutionary model predicts specific effects for content related to particular arousal-inducing motives. Three experiments examined how viewing fear-inducing or romantic content influenced the effectiveness of two common persuasion heuristics—scarcity (e.g., “last chance to buy”) and social proof (e.g., “most popular”). Results supported predictions from a functional evolutionary model, whereby fear-inducing content led social proof appeals to be counter-persuasive, and romantic content led scarcity appeals to be counter-persuasive.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

In this session, we will discuss how and why the presence of others can affect consumption decisions, challenging a model in which consumer behavior is seen as a private activity (individuals making choices in isolation) by demonstrating the powerful and wide-ranging impact of social factors on a diverse array of consumption decisions and contexts, including both laboratory and field studies. The first three papers present evidence about three different ways in which social factors influence consumption: the presence of others and its effect on preference for feature-rich products (Thompson and Norton), the positive contamination effect from attractive others touching a product (Argo et al.), and the effect of the choice set provided by others (Goldstein et al.). In the fourth paper, Griskevicius et al. ground these findings in a framework which has thus far been overlooked in consumer behavior—evolutionary psychology—suggesting fundamental reasons for the impact of social influences on consumer behavior, an approach which provides new and interesting insights for future research. Finally, John Deighton, an expert in consumer privacy issues—in some sense the interesting flip side of the current symposium—will serve as discussant, integrating the presentations, as well as highlighting the contribution of these papers to the consumer behavior literature and their implications for marketing research and practice. This symposium should be of interest to researchers in the areas of persuasion, marketing communications, information processing, and consumer decision making, as well as serving to focus future research on the interesting differences between private and public consumer behavior.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“The Social Utility of Feature Creep”
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A recent trend across several product categories is bundling a variety of product features into single, multi-purpose devices that perform several tasks. This trend towards offering a higher number of product features has been described as feature bloat or feature creep. Although adding features can indeed increase the value of a product to consumers, research shows that consumers tend to buy products with too many features, which after use do not maximize their satisfaction (Thompson, Hamilton, and Rust 2005). We investigate whether this seemingly suboptimal behavior may in fact serve a different—and at times more important—goal of obtaining social status. Specifically, we suggest that consumers may choose feature-rich options as a means of engaging in conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899) in order to impress their peers. This hypothesis requires two related phenomenon to be true: First, consumers should be more likely to choose feature-rich products when impression-management concerns are most salient (while preferences for basic products should be enhanced when privacy is highlighted), and second, individuals who choose high-feature products should be evaluated more favorably as a result of such conspicuous consumption.

In an initial study, participants were asked to evaluate two consumers, one who had purchased a product (either a cell phone or a digital camera) with 30 features, and one who had purchased that product with 15 features. To control for inferences about wealth, participants were told that the two consumers had paid the same amount for the products. As we expected, participants ascribed more positive traits (e.g., intelligent, adventurous) to the consumer who bought a product with more features than to the consumer who bought the product with fewer features.

Next, in a series of four studies, we used several manipulations of impression management goals and measured product preference for products with varying number of features. In Study 2, we used a priming task to elicit either impression management or accuracy goals. After completing the priming task, participants were invited to participate in a survey about cell phones and digital cameras. Consistent with our prediction, participants primed with impression management goals were significantly more likely to select high feature products than participants primed with accuracy goals. In Study 3, we replicated this finding by manipulating product category, by choosing some products that were predominantly used in public (e.g., digital cameras and gas grills) and others used predominantly in private (hair dryers and treadmills). As expected, participants showed greater preference for high feature products for public products, such as digital cameras and gas grills, but this preference reversed for private products, where participants preferred options with fewer features. In fact, merely asking participants to think about using the same product (e.g. an espresso machine) in either private (making their morning coffee) or public (hosting a brunch) altered their preference for high- vs. low-feature versions of those products (Study 4). Finally, in Study 5 we used products whose consumption was perceived as balanced in terms of public and private usage situations (e.g., MP3 players) and varied the observability of participants’ choices. As expected, preferences shifted significantly toward the high feature product in the public choice condition compared to the private choice condition. In addition, replicating results from study 1, participants perceived other participants who selected the high feature product as having significantly more positive traits than participants who selected the product with fewer features—and this was true even for participants who selected a low-feature option themselves.

Taken together, these results have interesting implications for theory and practice. First, these studies suggest that seemingly suboptimal behavior by consumers in isolation may in fact be rational if social concerns are taken into account. From a managerial standpoint, companies aiming at increasing or decreasing the share of feature-rich products can design marketing communications that heighten or attenuate impression management concerns (or, for example, designing channels with internet versus face-to-face sales). Additionally, adding features may have a positive effect on consumption that occurs in the presence of others. In public consumption situations, consumers may extract social utility (i.e., the possibility to signal positive personal traits to others) from the mere presence of product features; though when they leave that public setting and use that product at home, feature fatigue may begin to set in.
“Positive Consumer Contamination: Responses to Attractive Others in a Retail Context”

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When it comes to physical touch in retail settings, consumers are faced with a paradox: they want to touch products because it helps them gather information and make better purchase decisions (Peck and Childers 2003) but they feel disgusted when other people touch the products they want to buy and view touched products as having been negatively contaminated (Argo, Dahl, and Morales 2006). Thus, consumers desire to touch products while shopping, but do not want others to do the same. But is this always the case? Are there situations where products touched by other individuals result in positive reactions? The central focus of this research is to determine when physical contact between a product and another individual creates positive outcomes for the consumer. Prior research along with current business practices, suggests that the beauty and attractiveness of other consumers may play an influential role in addressing our research question. Although the effectiveness of appeals that utilize themes of beauty and attraction on brand attitudes and purchase intentions has been mixed (e.g., Percy and Rossiter 1992), retail managers seem to believe strongly that beauty can be an extremely powerful persuasion tool. For example, Abercrombie & Fitch has been in the headlines for specifically trying to hire “young, attractive, athletic types, and the cheerleaders who might be their girlfriends” to work in their stores (Edwards 2003, p. 16).

Despite the prominence of the belief that beauty and attractiveness are important in the retail atmosphere, surprisingly little research has actually examined the impact that people who are high in attractiveness may have on consumers during a shopping experience. To date, most research has focused on the use of attractive models in advertising (e.g., Smeesters and Mandel 2006), but has neglected a possible role of attractiveness in the retail consumption experience itself. Thus, this research provides insight into the effects of an attractive social influence in the context of consumer touching and contamination of store products. Specifically, we investigate how consumers respond when they see other individuals of varying levels of attractiveness touching the same products they want to purchase.

Building on previous work in contamination that shows people have lower evaluations of products that are touched by other shoppers (Argo et al. 2006), this research proposes that consumer contamination can also have positive effects (e.g., raise product evaluations). This prediction is tested in an actual retail environment where a product is perceived to have been physically touched by another individual. In our investigation we examine both the attractiveness level of the individual and the role the individual plays in the shopping environment (i.e., shopper or salesperson) on consumer reactions. Further, we consider the moderating role that gender may have on consumer contamination by varying whether the other individual is a male or a female and whether this matches or mismatches the gender of the consumer. Finally, we investigate the process through which positive contamination operates to see whether it follows a residue model of contagion resulting from physical contact with the other individual (Morales and Fitzsimons 2007), or if instead it is the result of a symbolic interaction model based on the interpersonal/moral factors of the other individual (Nemeroff and Rozin 1994).

Three field experiments examined the impact of level of attractiveness, gender (of both the participant and the contaminator) and the contamination event. The first two studies found that male participants evaluated a product (i.e., a shirt) more favorably when they believed that a highly (versus average) attractive female shopper had previously touched the product while female participants’ evaluations were equal regardless of the female shopper’s level of attractiveness. Study 2 also found that the reverse was true when participants believed a male shopper had previously touched the product. Females evaluated the product significantly more favorably when a highly (versus average) attractive male shopper touched the product while male participants evaluated the product equally low regardless of the male shopper’s level of attractiveness. Study 3 sought to identify which model of contagion explains the results while extending the contamination event to include a salesperson. The study demonstrated that the physical residue model best explains the results as participants evaluated a product significantly more favorably when a highly attractive salesperson had previously worn the product and had not cleaned it (versus cleaned). In contrast, when the product was previously worn by an average attractive salesperson, participants evaluated the product more favorably when the product was cleaned (versus not cleaned). The effects across all three studies are shown to be mediated by positive affect.

“The Push Technique: Social Influence and Predecisional Bias Among Fluid Choice Sets”

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Suppose that a car salesperson wants to get either Car A or Car B off the lot, but doesn’t care which one sells next. Instead of showing all the cars on the lot to the next customer sequentially, what if he first paired Car A with Car B and asked the customer to form a preference for one over the other, only showing the customer Cars C, D, and E afterwards? We argue that the customer in such a situation would be disproportionately likely to choose the originally preferred car than if he had presented all of the alternatives sequentially to the customer.

Although consumers often make purchase decisions while considering a single choice set that contains all of the available alternatives, there are many instances in which they choose from a more expansive choice set after forming a preference from a more limited choice set. What effect will forming a preference for an alternative have on a consumer’s final decision when the choice set is more fluid—that is, when it is expanded to include many other alternatives? Because the existing literature on predecisional biases is limited to static choice sets (see Brownstein 2003)—choice sets in which no new alternatives are added—the extant literature does not currently provide a clear answer.

Study 1 investigated whether consumers have a predecisional bias toward an initially preferred alternative such that they disproportionately choose that alternative when the final choice set is expanded to include several other, equally desirable alternatives. We also explored whether this novel type of predecisional bias might be moderated by consumers’ knowledge or lack of knowledge that they will be able to choose from an additional set of alternatives later. In Study 1, participants were first asked to review two sets of CDs that were nearly identical to one another in terms of each participant’s overall evaluation of the sets. Participants were asked to state which one of the two they prefer and then had an opportunity to choose from their preferred alternative and two new alternatives. The hypothesized bias toward the initially preferred alternative would be empirically found if participants tend to choose their initially preferred alternative among the other two alternatives at a rate statistically greater than chance—that is, at a
rate greater than 33.33% for a final choice set with three alternatives.

The data revealed that regardless of awareness condition, participants were disproportionately likely to choose the initially preferred alternative in the final expanded choice set, indicating that the predecisional bias effect does occur among fluid choice sets.

Study 2 examined the role of four potential mediating mechanisms of this bias by investigating the circumstances under which the bias exists and ceases to exist: First, individuals in such situations might be encouraged to use the heuristic of consistency (see Cialdini and Trost 1998). A second potential mechanism could be that when participants state their initial preference, they generate a set of reasons for that preference and then later rely on those reasons (e.g., Maio et al. 2001). A third possible mechanism for this effect could be that when choosing among the final choice set, participants identify the originally preferred alternative and spontaneously generate reasons to support their original preference (see Kunda 1987). Such a thoughtful response likely necessitates the availability of sufficient cognitive resources during the final choice. A fourth possible mechanism could be cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957).

In Study 2, we sought to uncover the mediating mechanisms of the effect by introducing a potential moderator of the effect: cognitive load. Using the experimental paradigm from Study 1, the introduction of a cognitive load manipulation occurred during the initial preference choice, during the final choice, during both choices, or during neither choice. Thus, the design was a 2 (First choice set: Load vs. No Load X 2 (Second choice set: Load vs. No Load) between participants design.

The results of Study 2 revealed that the bias failed to occur in the two conditions in which a cognitive load was induced during the final choice set, ruling out consistency, reason generation during the initial choice set, and cognitive dissonance as possible mediators—and pointing to the generation of reasons during the final choice set as the most likely mediator of the effect. These findings have implications for social influence strategies that can be utilized by influence agents to steer consumers toward particular alternatives as a function of how the alternatives are grouped and the sequence in which the alternatives are presented to consumers.

**“Fear and Loving in Las Vegas: Evolution, Emotion, and Persuasion”**

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Imagine you’re charged with the task of creating a television advertising campaign for a new product. Knowing that people typically don’t process ads very deeply, you craft the message using proven persuasion tactics that are particularly effective when people make heuristic evaluations. After learning that the ad tests well in a focus group, you purchase airtime during two perennially top-rated television programs: a police crime drama and a sexy romantic comedy. But exactly how will these programs influence the way people respond to the ad? And will an ad featuring common persuasive heuristics be effective during both programs?

Several well-established theoretical models make predictions regarding how romantic or fear-inducing programs should influence the effectiveness of persuasive heuristics. A general arousal model predicts that any show eliciting some arousal will tend to inhibit deep processing and increase effectiveness of a diagnostic heuristics (Sonbonmatsu and Kardes 1988; Pham 1996). A general affective-congruence model, however, differentiates between positive and negative feelings, and predicts a different pattern for each show: Romantic comedies should produce positive feelings, leading to shallower processing and increased effectiveness of persuasive shortcuts. Police dramas, in contrast, should produce negative affect, leading to more careful processing and decreased effectiveness of persuasive heuristics (Schwarz and Bless 1991).

In this research we investigated another possibility grounded in an evolutionary approach—one that predicts a different pattern of results. This approach suggests that television programs—or any kind of visual, auditory, or other sensory stimuli that precedes an ad—can activate qualitatively different motives and particular associated emotions, which in turn promote perceptions, cognitions, and behaviors conducive to the successful fulfillment of the active motive. Unlike models of general arousal or affect, this approach maintains that depending on which motive is currently active, a target will be tactically receptive to some messages and ignore others, selectively interpret the same information in completely different ways, and even respond negatively to some well-established persuasive strategies.

In three experiments we tested the influence of emotion-arousing contexts on two types of commonly used persuasion heuristics: Social proof and scarcity (Cialdini 2001). Social proof heuristics are based on the general heuristic rule that if many others are doing it, it must be good; social proof appeals tend to convey that a product is a top seller or is particularly popular. Scarcity heuristics are based on the general rule that if a product or opportunity is rare, it must be good; scarcity appeals tend to highlight features related to the distinctiveness, rarity, and uniqueness of a product or an opportunity.

According to an evolutionary perspective, the motives and emotions having the strongest effect on cognition and behavior are those most closely related to survival and reproduction. Following this logic, we investigated how social proof and scarcity heuristics are influenced by two such motives: the motive to protect oneself from danger and the motive to attract a romantic partner (Kenrick, Li, and Butner 2003). Given that self-protection motives produce group-cohesive processes and lead individuals to desire to join together with others, we predicted that (H1) Fear-inducing contexts should lead social proof heuristics to be more effective, but cause scarcity heuristics to be counter-persuasive. Given that romantic motives are likely to produce a desire to stand out from the crowd by positively differentiating oneself from one’s rivals, we predicted that (H2) romantic contexts should lead scarcity heuristics to be more effective, but cause social proof heuristics to backfire.

Contrary to predictions made by general arousal and affective-congruence models, the first two experiments showed that fear-inducing and romantic contexts influenced the effectiveness of the two heuristics in a way consistent with an evolutionary perspective. Fear led scarcity heuristics to backfire, while leading social proof appeals to be more persuasive. In contrast, romantic content led social proof heuristics to backfire, while leading scarcity appeals to be more persuasive. Not only were these findings different from those predicted by general arousal or affect models, but they cannot be explained by a simple persuasion matching-mismatching models.

Overall, this work demonstrates the utility of an evolutionary approach in consumer behavior by showing that an evolutionary approach can produce unique and testable predictions. Although this rich theoretical perspective has successfully led to theoretical advancements in the fields of biology, behavioral ecology, anthro-
pology, psychology, and economics, evolutionary models have thus far been almost completely absent in research in consumer behavior. We believe that the present work—and an evolutionary approach—reflect only the tip of a data-rich iceberg that can serve as an impetus for novel research and theory-building in marketing.