How Does the Defensive Consumer Choose?

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Abstract
The present study extends research on the defensive model of suspicion (Darke and Ritchie 2007) to the context of consumer choice. Prior research shows defensive suspicion induces negative product attitudes, but the implications for consumer choice have not yet been examined. We predict that defensive suspicion should lead to decisions that help minimize the chance of being tricked or misled. An experiment shows consumers who are experimentally induced into a suspicious mindset are more likely to defer their product choices when they have the opportunity, and more likely to choose an inexpensive versus premium alternative for forced choices.

Conceptualization
Historically, consumer choice research has focused on shifts in preferences related to the emphasis of various aspects of the choice task (e.g. Dhar and Sherman 1996; Dhar and Simonson 1992; Simonson and Tversky 1992). More recently, choice research has begun to focus on the goals of the consumer (Bettman, Luce, and Payne 2008). In this vein, the current research examines choice in the context of defensive goals evoked when consumers are actively suspicious about marketer tactics.

The current research adopted Darke and Ritchie’s (2007) dual process model to predict the effects of suspicion on consumer choice. Their model distinguishes between specific and generalized suspicion, type of information processing (heuristic vs. systematic), and processing goals (accuracy vs. defense). Traditionally, trust has been regarded as a simple heuristic cue. Indications that a particular source is trustworthy lead to greater agreement without much thought about the argument’s merits (e.g. Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983). Further, some forms of suspicion (e.g., ulterior motives) are known to increase systematic processing, leading to more careful thought and greater differentiation between strong and weak arguments (Priester and Petty 1995). This pattern is consistent with what Darke and Ritchie (2007) call accuracy-based suspicion, where initial distrust evokes the goal of forming a valid opinion, leading to greater objective processing, and attitudes reflective of the true merits of the arguments (see also Campbell and Kirmani 2000). However, they suggest that suspicion can also be more defensive in nature. Such defensive suspicion biases judgment in a way that helps protect the self-esteem or material interests of the consumer from perceived threats.

Darke and Ritchie (2007) support their defensive bias hypothesis in a series of experiments. A debriefing was used to inform subjects they had been deceived by an initial ad, followed by evaluations of a second advertisement for a different product presented under the guise of a separate study. The results indicated that advertising deception evoked defensive processing goals in the sense that consumers felt fooled or tricked. In order to avoid being misled again, consumers adopted more negative attitudes towards subsequently advertised products, even those advertised by unrelated second-parties. Process analyses showed that the initial deception led to generalized distrust towards advertisers—dubbed defensive stereotyping. Additional evidence argued against the alternative possibility that these effects were due to negative affect evoked by the deception manipulation. Importantly, there were a number of sources of evidence that these effects were produced through biased processing. For instance, advertising deception led to negative attitudes whether strong or weak arguments were included in the second ad, which is consistent with a defensive bias because accuracy-based processing should have produced greater differentiation between strong and weak arguments rather than uniformly negative responses. In addition, defensive stereotyping was observed only when consumers were the direct victims of the advertising deception (high ego-involvement), and not when they merely learned of it second-hand (low ego-involvement). Finally, consumers relied on their generalized suspicions to make attitude judgments even when highly diagnostic information was available that the second-party advertiser was trustworthy (Darke, Ashworth, and Ritchie 2008).

The above evidence suggests that advertiser deception evokes defensive goals that have the effect of negatively biasing subsequent product attitudes. However, it is not clear what implications such generalized suspicions have for consumer choices within a set. The study described here examines these implications. In general, we propose that consumer suspicion is likely to lead to more conservative choices. This can take the form of delaying choice when that option is available, in the same way that negative emotions (Luce 1998) or difficult decisions (Dhar 1997, Dhar and Nowlis 1999) can lead to delayed choice. When forced to choose, suspicious consumers are likely to avoid high priced options that purport to be of higher quality in favor of lower price (and quality) options because more modest product claims are less likely to evoke defensive concerns (Darke and Ritchie 2007).

Method
A sample of 229 adults (137 females), aged between 18 and 91 (mean 34.1) were randomly assigned to a 2 (suspicion: yes or no) x 2 (firms: same or different) between subjects design. Suspicion was manipulated by a procedure similar to Darke and Ritchie (2007) as described above. The effectiveness of this manipulation was confirmed through a check. Results showed that participants in the suspicion condition felt more fooled by the initial ad, relative to controls (Ms=5.32 versus 3.54, t(207)=13.66, p<.001; seven-point scales).

Following the suspicion manipulation, participants began what was ostensibly a separate study conducted by another researcher. Participants were presented with three choice tasks across different categories (binoculars, microwave ovens, and mp3 players). In each case, one option was presented as higher quality and price than its alternative. Subjects could choose either of the two options, or to delay their choice altogether. The second factor was manipulated by presenting the alternatives as being offered by a single retailer, or by two competing retailers. Note that these retailers were always fictitious and were unrelated to the initial advertiser who had deceived participants.