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The Persuasive Role of Incidental Similarity on Attitudes and Purchase Intentions in a Sales Context

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This paper examines the effects of incidental similarity shared between a salesperson and a potential consumer in a sales situation. We show that a shared birthday can result in a more favorable attitude and a higher intention to purchase and the need for social connectedness can underlie the effects. In addition, we identify two boundary conditions that qualify our findings. We show that the valence of the salesperson's behavior towards an unknown other and the length of the interpersonal relationship moderate the process. When the need for social connectedness is mitigated, the positive effects of incidental similarity are lost.

[to cite]:

Lan Jiang, Darren Dahl, Amitava Chattopadhyay, and JoAndrea Hoegg (2009) , "The Persuasive Role of Incidental Similarity on Attitudes and Purchase Intentions in a Sales Context", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 36, eds. Ann L. McGill and Sharon Shavitt, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 598-599.

[url]:

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The study of similarity in persuasion has a long history. The majority of research in this area has been conducted to examine the role of attitude similarity between individuals, but this research has recently been extended to examine the role of incidental similarity, i.e., chance similarities between individuals that provide little relevant information and few implications in a specific context (Burger et al. 2004). For example, a shared birthday with another individual provides no diagnostic information regarding compatibility as business partners.

In most instances, logic would indicate that incidental similarities should not play a significant role in social environments. However, existing research has shown that incidental similarity can play a role in social situations and can increase liking, persuasion, and cooperative behavior between individuals (e.g., Burger et al. 2004). In this paper we extend these initial findings for incidental similarity to an interpersonal context. Specifically, we examine the effects of incidental similarity shared between a salesperson and a potential consumer in an actual face-to-face sales situation. Further, we provide an explanation for how and why incidental similarity can have a persuasive influence, in this instance. To do this, we draw on the theoretical framework of a need for belongingness (Baumeister and Leary 1995), where people strive to achieve social connectedness with those around them. This framework is particularly relevant in an interpersonal situation, which is the context of our investigation.

Four experiments show our contributions: 1) we establish social connectedness as an important underlying mechanism for the effect of incidental similarity. While previous research (e.g., Brendl et al. 2005) has shown that self-esteem enhancement can underlie incidental similarity effects, we show that in the interpersonal context social connectedness drives the effects of incidental similarity and that our results cannot be explained on the basis of self-esteem, 2) we identify two boundary conditions that qualify our findings: the valence of sales person's behavior towards an unknown other and the length of the interpersonal relationship as being critical moderators to the process we outline. We show that when the need for social connectedness is mitigated, i.e., when the salesperson is disliked or when the relationship is not expected to continue, the positive effects of incidental similarity are lost.

We propose that discovering an incidental similarity with a negative or disliked other will decrease the need for connectedness and cause individuals to distance themselves from the similar other. Since connectedness can underlie the relationship between incidental similarity and attitudes/purchase intentions, we expect that distancing in the sales context investigated will mean negative implications for attitude formation and the resulting purchase intentions. We also expect the negative outcome caused by an incidental similarity during an unpleasant social interaction to be mitigated when the social interaction is brief and unlikely to continue.

Using an actual sales situation, Study 1 tests for the effects of incidental similarity in a service context and identifies the role of

connectedness in the process. We manipulated incidental similarity through shared birthday. After a sales promotion for a personal training program, consumers who accidentally found out that they share the birthday with the trainer reported a more favorable attitude towards the program as well as a higher intention to enroll in the program. The direct measure on the sense of connectedness and the mediation analysis corroborated our hypothesis that social connectedness could be the underlying mechanism for the incidental similarity effect.

Study 2 further validates the role of connectedness by comparing the effects of incidental similarity for individuals differing in their chronic tendency to connect with others. We found that people who have a low social connectedness orientation are least influenced by the shared birthday and on the other hand, people with a high social connectedness orientation are influenced most strongly.

Study 3 tests the potential boundary condition for the observed effect of incidental similarity by identifying the importance of the valenced behavior of the referent other in achieving both a social connection and an effect for incidental similarity. We showed a reversed effect of the shared birthday when the salesperson displays some negative traits during the promotion. When participants discover that they share the same birthday with a person who is rude, the similarity no longer helps establish connection and instead it makes them feel more disconnected. The decreased feeling of connectedness leads to a more negative attitude towards the program and lowers their intention to purchase.

Our final study tests another possible boundary condition of the incidental similarity effect—the anticipated length of the interpersonal relationship with the salesperson. We show that this negative effect that was realized was mitigated when the social interaction was just a brief encounter with no future interactions expected. In non-aversive conditions, an incidental similarity increased attitude favorability and purchase intentions even when the interaction with the similar other was a brief encounter.

To our knowledge, this research is the first empirical test of social connectedness as a theoretical explanation for when and why individuals will be affected by an incidental similarity. Drawing from the theory of belongingness (Baumeister and Leary 1995), we tested two features of the need for belongingness, the valence of the interaction and the length of the relationship, as moderators for incidental similarity effects. Our results not only confirmed the impact of these two situational factors, but also extended Baumeister and Leary's (1995) proposition by demonstrating a negative effect of incidental similarity in an aversive condition.

From a managerial perspective, our research provides insight into the power of cultivating similarity between consumers and sales agents in the retail context. Matching sales people with consumers to enhance shared similarity is an obvious recommendation for marketing practice. Our research suggests that even matching based on incidental similarities may have an influence on consumer decision making. It is important to note however, that salespeople that share a similarity also have the capacity to alienate consumers if their behavior is perceived to be negative.

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