The Illusion of Avoiding Bias: How Correcting For Perceived Bias Can Make a Recommendation More Effective

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This research shows that correcting for the influence of a product recommendation moderates source trustworthiness effects on behavioral intentions and can make a recommendation more effective. Study 1 shows that when consumers correct their judgments, differences in the effectiveness of recommendations from trusted and distrusted sources are eliminated. Study 2 suggests that the effect is mediated by the certainty with which consumers hold their judgments. Study 3 provides further support for the certainty explanation by replicating the effect when participants are subliminally primed with certainty and the source of recommendation is constant.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14751/volumes/v36/NA-36

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Based on previous research, we expect that consumers would be more influenced by a recommendation coming from a trusted source (e.g., a friend) than by a recommendation coming from a distrusted source (e.g., a salesperson; Wilson and Sherrell 1993). However, we demonstrate that this is not always the case. Research on bias correction shows that individuals correct for perceived bias in their judgments by making adjustments in the direction opposite to which they believe the context is influencing their judgments (Wegener and Petty 1995). Because consumers may naturally resist a recommendation from a distrusted source, attempting to remove bias from their judgments may, ironically, increase rather than decrease the effectiveness of a recommendation from a distrusted source. As a result, a recommendation from a distrusted source can become not only more effective, but just as effective as a recommendation from a trusted source.

We examine three potential explanations for the moderating effect of correction on source trustworthiness effects: Changes in perceptions of ulterior motives of the recommender; changes in overall attitudes towards the recommended product; and changes in judgment (attitude) certainty. Building on previous research (Tormala and Petty 2002, 2004, Tormala, Clarkson, and Petty 2006) we propose that judgment certainty is mediating the effect.

We focus on the role of certainty because research suggests that attitude certainty can change as a result of consumers’ observing their reactions to a persuasive attempt (Tormala and Petty 2002, 2004). Assuming that correction instructions motivate individuals to observe their reactions and to resist the influence of a recommendation (Briñol et al. 2004), we predict that asking consumers to correct their judgments will change the certainty with which participants hold their judgments. Therefore, we propose that certainty, rather than perceived ulterior motives of the recommender or overall attitudes toward the product, will mediate the effect of source trustworthiness and correction on willingness to buy.

Study 1 (N=71) employed a 2 source trustworthiness (friend vs. salesperson) x 2 correction (no-correction vs. correction) between-subjects design and a jacket purchase scenario adapted from Campbell and Kirmani (2000). A 2x2 ANOVA reveals an interaction (F(1, 67)=4.53, p<.05) suggesting that correction eliminated the effect of source trustworthiness. Participants were more willing to buy a product when the trusted source (friend) recommended it, than when the distrusted source (salesperson) recommended it (F(1, 30)=8.61, p<.01). However, when participants were instructed to correct their judgments (based on instructions adapted from Wegener and Petty 1995), the effect of trustworthiness was no longer significant (F(1, 37)=.01, p>.90). Notably, no significant effects emerged for the overall attitude measure (all p>.12), and although the salesperson was perceived to have more ulterior motives than the friend (F(1, 67)=48.86, p<.001), the effect of correction was not significant (p>.33).

Study 2 (N=267) employed a 3 source trustworthiness (federal agency vs. control) x 2 correction (no-correction vs. correction) design. Participants read a pamphlet describing the benefits of phosphate detergents and learned that the pamphlet was either produced by a federal agency or by the manufacturer (Briñol, Petty, and Tormala 2004). The correction manipulation was adapted from study 1.

As predicted, an interaction between source and correction in a 3x2 ANOVA (F(1, 259)=4.13, p<.02) indicates that, in the no correction condition, participants were more willing to buy the product when the trusted source recommended it than when the distrusted source recommended it (M_trusted product=5.15, M_control=5.02), (F(1, 130)=5.43, p<.02). Correction eliminated this difference (M_trusted product=4.58, M_control=4.89), (F(1, 129)=1.36, p>.12). A 3x2 ANOVA with certainty as dependent variable reveals a similar interaction (F(1, 259)=5.43, p<.01).

We conducted regressions to test mediation by certainty. In the first regression, the interaction between source and correction (t=2.83, p<.005) affected the dependent variable willingness to buy. In the second regression, the interaction between source and correction (t=2.47, p<.02) affected the mediator variable attitude certainty. In the third regression, attitude certainty (t=3.27, p<.001) affected willingness to buy, and the interaction between source and correction was no longer significant (t=1.79, p=.08; Sobel z=2.41, p<.01). These results support the mediating role of certainty.

Study 3 (N=163) provides further support for the process mechanism by manipulating certainty subliminally and holding the source of the recommendation constant. Using a 2 certainty (uncertainty vs. certainty) x 2 correction (no-correction vs. correction) design, we first subliminally exposed participants to certainty and uncertainty-related words. Then, participants indicated their willingness to rent an apartment recommended by a realtor. If certainty affects behavioral intentions, we should detect a difference in willingness to rent the recommended apartment in the no correction condition. If, as proposed, correction changes certainty, after correction the change in certainty should be reflected in the behavioral intentions measure.

As predicted, a significant interaction between certainty and correction on behavioral intentions in a 2x2 ANOVA (F(1, 159)=5.41, p<.02) suggests that, in the no correction condition, participants primed with certainty had more favorable behavioral intentions towards the recommended apartment than participants primed with uncertainty (M_certainty=5.02, M_uncertainty=4.16), (F(1, 86)=5.26, p<.02). When participants were instructed to correct, this difference was eliminated (M_certainty=4.18, M_uncertainty=4.54), (F(1, 73)=.99, p>.3).

Across three studies, we show the basic effect and support mediation by judgment certainty. The results contribute to the bias correction literature by suggesting a new process mechanism through which correction operates to influence judgments, and to persuasion research by showing one condition in which behavioral intentions can change directly as a function of certainty, while attitude favorability remains unchanged.

REFERENCES


