‘Deception At a Distance’: How and When Does Temporal Distance Affect Persuasion Knowledge Activation?

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Consistent with construal level theory, we present results from an experiment demonstrating that the temporal distance of a purchase decision can affect persuasion knowledge activation when the topic of the persuasive statement is congruent with the construal level. This interaction is then shown to have adverse effects on brand evaluations that are mediated by persuasion knowledge activation through an automatic process.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Friestad and Wright (1994) theorize that consumers acquire persuasion knowledge over the lifespan. Such knowledge structure contains beliefs about the ways by which marketers and other persuasion agents attempt to persuade consumers and how consumers cope with these persuasion attempts. Researchers have theorized that when a consumer perceives a marketing agent to be appealing to psychological factors that the consumer believes to mediate persuasiveness (e.g., attention, emotion), the agent is perceived to be engaging in persuasive activities and the current (and, to some extent, future) encounters are evaluated by the consumer in this light (Friestad & Wright, 1994). At this point the consumer engages in one or more coping strategies to deal with the persuasion attempt (Kirmani & Campbell, 2004) and the consumers’ persuasion knowledge is said to be activated. This entire process of persuasion knowledge activation has often been shown to result in decreased evaluations of the stimuli, product, brand, and even future messages by the brand (Main, Dahl, & Darke, 2007; Kirmani & Zhu, 2007; Wei, Fischer, & Main, 2006; Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). This research builds on previous work in persuasion knowledge by focusing on situations in which consumers are engaged in non-imminent (i.e., temporally distant) purchase decisions and where message cues vary in terms of the product feature mentioned in the persuasive message.

Conceptually, we draw on the work in Construal Level Theory (CLT) to arrive at our hypotheses. CLT argues that when events or objects are temporally distant, physically far, less like ourselves, or less probable, we tend to think about (and therefore describe) them in terms of their more abstract, stable, and general features (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007). In other words, we form a high-level construal of the subject. Conversely, when events or objects are imminent, physically closer, more like ourselves, or more probable, CLT argues that we tend to think about and describe them in terms of their detailed, less stable, and peripheral features (Trope et al., 2007). That is, we engage in low-level construal. One implication of this is that we tend to focus on the primary features of a product when the purchase decision is temporally distant, but on the secondary features when the purchase decision is imminent (Trope & Liberman, 2000). Based on this, we arrived at three hypotheses. H1 suggests that a temporally distant purchase decision will lead to significantly higher persuasion knowledge activation and perceived ad deceptiveness than a temporally proximal purchase decision, but only when the product feature mentioned in the persuasive message cue is a primary feature. When the product feature mentioned in the persuasive message cue is a secondary feature, no differences will be present. H2a followed by suggesting that a temporally distant purchase decision will lead to significantly lower product and brand evaluations than a temporally proximal purchase decision, but only when the product feature mentioned in the persuasive message cue is a primary feature. When the product feature mentioned in the persuasive message cue is a secondary feature, no differences in product and brand evaluations will be present. Further, H2b suggests that the negative relationship between the temporal distance/product feature interaction effect and brand attitude will be mediated by persuasion knowledge activation.

We conducted a 2 (product feature mentioned: primary or secondary) X 2 (temporal distance: proximal vs. distant) experiment using 167 undergraduate students who were randomly assigned to treatments. The first page of the instrument package was a scenario in which subjects were told to imagine either that they would like to buy a digital camera today (temporally proximal) or one year from now (temporally distant), just before they leave to go on vacation to Europe. In both conditions, subjects were then asked to imagine browsing through a magazine today, and while doing this, encountering the advertisement on the following page of the package. The one-page print advertisement was for a new digital camera manufactured by a fictional brand named Eyelum. The second claim in the advertisement was highly deceptive in reporting either that the studies conducted by Eyelum found that the LCD screen used by the Eyelum e2000 was of higher quality than the LCD screen used by Canon (secondary feature condition) or studies conducted by Eyelum found that the lens used by the Eyelum e2000 is of higher quality than the lens used by Canon (primary feature condition).

Controlling for factors such as depth of processing and previous individual differences in importance of lenses vs. LCD screens, we find full support for H1 and H2a, and partial support for H2b. With regard to H1, there was a significant interaction effect on both persuasion knowledge thoughts (measured by coding thoughts of suspicion) (p<.04) and perceived ad deceptiveness (measured as three likert items: truthfulness, believability, and non-deceptiveness) (p<.05). Most importantly, while there were no differences between respondents in the secondary feature conditions, temporally distant subjects reported more persuasion knowledge thoughts and more perceived ad deceptiveness than temporally proximal subjects (Persuasion Knowledge Thoughts: p<.01; Perceived Ad Deceptiveness: p<.02). Consistent with H2a, we found no main effects but significant interaction effects on product quality (measured as five likert items: quality, reliability, performance, stylishness, and produces sharper pictures) and brand evaluations (measured as three likert items: likeable, appealing, favourable) (both ps<.02). Again, while there were no differences between the secondary feature treatments, we found differences between the primary feature treatments for both measures (both ps<.02). For H2b, we attempted two mediation analyses first using persuasion knowledge thoughts as the mediating variable and then using perceived ad deceptiveness as the mediating variable. Results showed that only perceived deceptiveness moderated the relationship between the temporal distance/product feature interaction and brand attitudes, providing evidence that the mediating role of persuasion knowledge operates via an automatic process.

REFERENCES


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