Can Persuasion Knowledge Change Preferred Persuasion Based on Self-Construal?
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People, in general, prefer persuasive messages matching with their self view. However, when people give greater thought to persuasive messages, they may change their preference. With the consideration of persuasion knowledge, self-construal (interdependent vs. independent) is likely to switch their preference of persuasion attempts from sales agents.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction

People generally prefer a persuasive message that matches with one’s self view. For example, people tend to have favorable attitudes when advertising appeals match their self-construal (a compatible effect; e.g., Han & Shavitt, 1994). In particular, people with an interdependent self-construal favor interpersonally focused ads (e.g., focus on family), whereas people with an independent self-construal favor individually focused ads (e.g., focus on uniqueness). However, when people consider the message in more detail or use their persuasion knowledge, the effect of favoring a matched message may change. In other words, when people have sufficient cognitive resources, they may question the meaning behind the persuasive message (i.e., persuasion knowledge; Friedstad & Wright, 1994) instead of using their intuition to make judgments. The current research aims to explore the influence of cognitive capacity and persuasion knowledge on how consumers with different self-construals respond to various persuasion attempts and form their attitudes in an interpersonal context where a direct interaction between consumers and sales agents occurs.

The activation of persuasion knowledge (i.e., a consumers’ knowledge of sales agents or sales tactics developed in the marketplace; Friestad & Wright, 1994) is closely related to cognitive resources (Campbell & Kirmani 2000; Williams, Fitzsimons, & Block, 2004). When cognitive capacity is constrained, consumers’ persuasion knowledge is less likely to be activated (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000) so a compatible effect is expected to show for both interdependent and independent self-construal due to the preference of messages which match with self view (Birley & Aaker, 2006).

However, when cognitive capacity is sufficient, persuasion knowledge can be activated. In this case, the effect of matching persuasive messages with self-construal may disappear. Instead the mismatched persuasive message may create a positive effect depending on the salience of one’s self-construal where an interdependent self-construal is sensitive to contextual details and an independent self-construal pays attention to dispositional information (Nisbett et al., 2001). An interdependent self-construal leads to a focus on contextual details which may make the processing less (or more) fluent based on whether the incoming message is incongruent (or congruent) with one’s self view (Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994). As ease of processing demands less cognitive resources (Reber, Wurtz, & Zimmermann, 2004, the processing of individually (versus interpersonally) focused persuasion attempts will demand more (versus less) cognitive resources for an interdependent self-construal. Therefore, persuasion knowledge is less (versus more) likely to be activated and, in turn, the trust in sales agents who use persuasion attempts is higher (versus lower). In contrast, the focus on dispositional information for those with an independent self-construal makes impression formation easier and less demanding on cognitive resources (Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988), so persuasion knowledge is likely activated when encountering persuasion attempts (regardless of whether they are individually or interpersonally focused) from sales agents. Thus the trust in the sales agents is low leading to a null effect with an independent self-construal.

First and foremost, the present research contributes to the culture literature by examining the role of persuasion knowledge in changing people’s preference of persuasion attempts, especially for those with salient interdependent self-construal. The current research also contributes to the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friedstad & Wright, 1994) by recognizing the important influence of self-construal on the activation of persuasion knowledge, which in turn affects consumer responses to sales agents. This boundary condition of the Persuasion Knowledge Model advances our understanding of when persuasion attempts will be more or less effective leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the role of persuasion knowledge under varying conditions of self-construal salience. Finally, the current research contributes to the literature in both psychology and consumer behavior by introducing one way of delineating persuasion attempts through their focus on uniqueness versus commonality instead of mainly focusing on social attempts such as flattery (Main, Dahl, & Darke, 2007). We test our propositions through three studies. This finding offers potential applications for international companies that are planning to open retail stores in different cultural settings. For stores opened in a relatively collective culture, the company may need to train their sales agents to provide customers with individually-focused persuasion attempts (e.g., focusing on uniqueness)—a possibly surprising approach.

Method

Study 1

The objective of S1 is to test consumers’ response to persuasion attempts from sales agents with the salience of interdependent (vs. independent) self-construal when considering the influence of persuasion knowledge. This was a 2 (persuasion attempt: individually vs. interpersonally focused) × 2 (primed self-construal: interdependent vs. independent) × 2 (cognitive capacity: normal vs. constrained) between-subjects design with 158 undergraduate business students from a central university in Canada.

Procedure. The self-construal priming consisted of asking half the participants to recall a nice purchase made for a friend or family member and how they felt about it. The other half were asked to recall a nice purchase for themselves and how they felt about it, adapted from Mandel (2003). After the priming, participants were asked to read a shopping scenario to buy a camera. They were told to search for and compare different cameras when a sales agent approached and tried to help them. During the interaction with a sales agent, half of the participants were informed: “That’s a great camera. Whenever you are together with your family, you can capture those impressive moments and record your family’s experience” (interpersonally focused persuasion attempt). The other half were told: “That’s a great camera. Whenever you go on a trip by yourself, you can capture those impressive moments and record your unique experience” (individually focused persuasion attempt). The manipulation of interpersonally (vs. individually focused persuasion attempt) was adapted from Lau-Gesk (2003). Cognitive capacity also was manipulated in the shopping scenario. In the constrained cognitive capacity conditions, participants were asked to remember any numbers presented in the scenario (eight numbers were shown in the scenario). In the unconstrained cognitive capacity conditions, the same numbers were
presented but participants were not required to recall any of them. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the eight conditions.

Measures. To assess trust in the sales agent, seven 7-point scale items, ranging from 1 (insincere/not fake/dishonest/not phony/untrustworthy/not manipulative/not pushy) to 7 (sincere/fake/honest/phony/trustworthy/manipulative/pushy) were drawn from previous research (Main et al., 2007). Four of them were reverse-coded. Factor analysis indicated that these seven items loaded together, and thus they were averaged to form a trust index ($\alpha = .71$).

Open-ended questions were coded to identify thoughts related to persuasion knowledge. Two judges (agreement was 90%) coded the target of the listed thoughts as related or unrelated to persuasion knowledge (e.g., skepticism about the truthfulness of the salesperson’s comments would be related, while a comment such as “It reminds me of my last purchase” is not related to persuasion knowledge). As additional examples, if participants mentioned that “the salesclerk tried to convince consumers to buy products by saying good things”, persuasion knowledge (“1”) was coded. Instead, if participants stated that “the scenario sounded like something they would normally do when purchasing,” “other” (“0”) was coded.

Manipulation Check. Cognitive capacity was checked by asking “To what extent did you try to remember the numbers in the scenario?” The effectiveness of the persuasion attempt manipulation was assessed by asking “When thinking about the camera you were about to purchase, to what extent did that purchase emphasize feeling connected with family?” Both manipulations were successful.

Results. A 2x2x2 ANOVA illustrated a significant three-way interaction ($F(1,150) = 12.8$, $p < .001$) on trust in the sales agent. Planned contrasts indicated that under normal and unconstrained cognitive capacity, an incompatible effect occurred. In particular, participants primed with interdependence had significantly higher trust in the sales agent when processing an individually as compared to an interpersonally focused persuasion attempt (4.60 vs. 4.05; $F(1,73) = 4.52$, $p < .05$). In contrast, persuasion-attempt type had no influence on participants primed with independence (4.09 vs. 4.38; $F(1,73) = 1.43$, $p = .25$).

In the constrained cognitive capacity condition, a compatible effect appeared. Specifically, participants primed with interdependence had higher trust in the sales agent for interpersonally as opposed to individually focused persuasion attempts (4.76 vs. 4.16; $F(1,77) = 4.73$, $p < .05$). In contrast, participants primed with independence had higher trust in the sales agent for individually as opposed to interpersonally focused persuasion attempts (4.78 vs. 4.15; $F(1,77) = 4.87$, $p < .05$).

Moderated mediation of Persuasion Knowledge (PK). We bootstrapped the indirect effect of the different persuasion attempts and priming on trust through PK, using the SPSS syntax of the MOD-MED version (Hayes & Matthes, 2009). The results demonstrated that the indirect interaction between self-construal and persuasion attempt type through persuasion knowledge on trust in the sales agent was significantly different from zero under the normal cognitive capacity condition (95% CI: -.36 to 0.00) but it was not significant under the constrained cognitive capacity condition (95% CI: -.12 to .30). In other words, persuasion knowledge mediated the interaction effect of persuasion attempt type and priming on trust in the sales agent when cognitive capacity was not constrained, but its mediating effect was attenuated when cognitive capacity was constrained.

Study 1 indicates that under normal cognitive capacity, a salient interdependent self-construal had higher trust in the sales agent who use individually focused persuasion attempt, and persuasion knowledge plays a mediating role in this effect. In contrast, persuasion attempt type had no influence on participants primed with an independent self-construal as shown by a high level of persuasion knowledge under both types of persuasion attempts.

In addition, we find that when cognitive capacity is constrained, a compatible effect occurs. That is, interpersonally (vs. individually) focused persuasion attempts lead to higher (vs. lower) trust in the sales agent for those primed with an interdependent self-construal, whereas individually (vs. interpersonally) focused persuasion attempts result in higher (vs. lower) trust in the sales agent for those primed with an independent self-construal. As the compatible effect has been well established in cross cultural research, in next three studies, we will focus on conditions under which cognitive capacity is not constrained.

Study 2

This study is a 2 (persuasion attempt: individually vs. interpersonally focused) × 2 (primed self-construal: interdependent vs. independent) between-subjects design conducted in Hong Kong. Participants were 124 undergraduate students with an average age of 21.4 (male 49, female 75) recruited from a Hong Kong university where English is a teaching language. The questions were presented with English version. Students who participated received HK$50 for compensation.

Procedure. We used a pronoun-circling task in a paragraph involving a trip to a restaurant (Oyserman, Sorensen, Reber, & Chen, 2009) to prime interdependent versus independent self-construal. Eighteen personal pronouns were embedded in the paragraph. Half of the participants were given a paragraph containing embedded we’s, and the other half were presented with a paragraph containing embedded I’s. Next, participants were asked to read a shopping scenario with the same persuasion attempt manipulation as in Study 1.

Measures. Trust in the sales agent was measured by using the same items as prior studies ($\alpha = .81$). We also measured purchase intentions and store satisfaction. Purchase intention was measured by asking participants how likely they are to buy the camera from this store. Following Westbrook (1980), store satisfaction was assessed by asking participants how they would evaluate their experience at the store (Unsatisfied/Satisfied, Disappointed/Delighted, and Indifferent/Excited; $\alpha = .95$). We measured persuasion knowledge by coding the number of negative thoughts about the sales agent (e.g., Pat tries to promote camera; I become a little annoyed with Pat etc.). The manipulation check item was the same as prior studies and was successful.

Results and discussion. An ANOVA with primed self-construal and persuasion attempt type as the two independent factors showed a significant interaction on trust in the sales agent ($F(1,120) = 6.50$, $p < .05$) and purchase intention ($F(1,120) = 6.56$, $p < .05$), and marginally significant interaction on store satisfaction ($F(1,120) = 3.46$, $p = .06$). Planned contrasts showed that when participants were primed with an interdependent self-construal, individually (vs. interpersonally) focused persuasion attempts resulted in higher trust in the sales agent ($4.48$ vs. $3.75$, $F(1,120) = 11.93$, $p < .01$), purchase intentions ($4.17$ vs. $3.52$, $F(1,120) = 3.80$, $p = .05$), and store satisfaction ($4.41$ vs. $3.61$, $F(1,120) = 7.59$, $p < .01$). However, when participants were primed with an independent self-construal, the three outcomes did not differ for the two types of persuasion attempt ($F < 1$, ns). Bootstrapping analysis demonstrated that the indirect interaction between self-construal and persuasion attempt type through persuasion knowledge was significantly different from zero on trust in the sales agent (95% CI: .10 to .39) and purchase intentions (95% CI: .03 to .24). Given the marginal significant of store satisfaction, the interval was close to zero but include zero (95% CI: -.006 to .107).

The results of Study 2 support the propositions of a null effect where persuasion attempt type does not influence consumer respons-
es when consumers have a salient independent self-construal. More importantly, when an interdependent self-construal is activated, individually rather than interpersonally focused persuasion attempts led to higher trust in the sales agent, purchase intentions, and store satisfaction. Persuasion knowledge plays a mediating role.

Study 3

The goal of Study 3 is to further test this underlying process through manipulating persuasion knowledge among those with a salient interdependent self-construal. In particular, we propose that the incompatible effect will show under the condition of high persuasion knowledge. As the mismatch (match) between interdependent self-construal and persuasion attempts demands (does not demand) more cognitive resources due to ease of processing (Reber, et al., 2004), the processing of individually (versus interpersonally) focused persuasion attempts may (may not) suppress the high level of persuasion knowledge. Consequently, individually as compared to interpersonally focused persuasion attempts will result in higher trust in the sales agent under high persuasion knowledge.

This was a 2 (persuasion attempt: individually vs. interpersonally focused) × 2 (persuasion knowledge: low vs. high) between-subjects design conducted in a laboratory setting. Participants were 100 undergraduate business students with an average age of 20.4 (male 47, female 53) from a central university in Canada who participated in return for course credit.

Procedure. We used the same technique as in Study 2 to prime all participants with an interdependent self-construal as well as the manipulation of persuasion attempt type. In the shopping scenario, we also manipulated persuasion knowledge, which was adapted from Kirmani and Zhu (2007). In the condition with high persuasion knowledge, the sales agent told participants: “In a recent study conducted by our store, consumers rated this model of camera as producing better-quality pictures than the leading brand.” In the condition with low persuasion knowledge, the sales agent told participants: “In a recent study conducted by Consumer Reports, consumers rated this model of camera as producing better-quality pictures than the leading brand.”

Measures. The measure of trust, purchase intentions, and store satisfaction were the same as Study 2. The manipulation of persuasion attempts was successful and the manipulation check for persuasion knowledge was measured by asking participants: “The sales agent’s claims about the camera based on the recent study were not truthful/truthful”.

Results and discussion. A 2x2 ANOVA illustrated a significant two-way interaction between persuasion knowledge and persuasion attempt type on trust in the sales agent \( F(1, 96) = 9.88, p < .01 \), purchase intentions \( F(1, 96) = 4.42, p < .05 \), and store satisfaction \( F(1, 96) = 4.45, p < .05 \). Planned contrasts indicated that with high persuasion knowledge, an incompatible effect occurred, which is consistent with prior studies. Participants had significantly higher trust in the sales agent \( 4.67 \text{ vs. } 3.57; F(1, 96) = 14.76, p < .01 \), purchase intentions \( 4.79 \text{ vs. } 3.88; F(1, 96) = 5.87, p < .05 \), and store satisfaction \( 4.88 \text{ vs. } 3.92; F(1, 96) = 5.41, p < .05 \) when processing an individually as compared to an interpersonally focused persuasion attempt. In contrast, persuasion attempt type had no influence on participants with low persuasion knowledge (trust: \( 4.31 \text{ vs. } 4.46; F(1, 96) = 0.29, p = .59 \); purchase intentions: \( 4.48 \text{ vs. } 4.67; F(1, 96) = 0.26, p = .61 \); and store satisfaction: \( 4.55 \text{ vs. } 4.80; F(1, 96) = 0.39, p < .53 \).

The results of Study 3 demonstrate that when interdependence is primed, under low persuasion knowledge, trust in the sales agent, purchase intentions, and store satisfaction are not affected by the type of persuasion attempts, while under high persuasion knowledge, there is a positive effect when the sales agent uses an individually focused as compared to an interpersonally focused persuasion attempt. This study further reveals the role of persuasion knowledge as the mechanism in the interaction between self-construal and the type of persuasion attempts. We argue that due to the additional demand for cognitive resources, individually focused persuasion attempts may make people suppress the high level of persuasion knowledge, which leads to higher trust in the sales agent, purchase intentions, and store satisfaction. On the contrary, processing interpersonally focused persuasion attempts is not cognitively demanding, so high persuasion knowledge remains and, in turn, people with a salient interdependent self-construal have lower trust in the sales agent, purchase intentions, and store satisfaction.

General Discussion

The present research explores the three effects between self-construal and different persuasion attempts in an interpersonal persuasion context across cultures. Four studies conducted with consumers from two cultures (Canada and China) reveal that with normal cognitive capacity, an interdependent self-construal tends to result in an incompatible effect with interpersonally versus individually focused persuasion attempts. In particular, individually focused persuasion attempts lead to higher trust in the sales agent and greater purchase intentions than do interpersonally focused persuasion attempts. However, persuasion attempts have no influence on consumers with a salient independent self-construal (i.e. a null effect). These findings were robust across various manipulations of self-construal. When cognitive capacity is constrained, a compatible effect appears for both salient interdependent and independent self-construal, where those with an interdependent self-construal prefer interpersonally focused persuasion attempts while those with an independent self-construal prefer individually focused persuasion attempts. This result under constrained cognitive capacity is consistent with Briley and Aaker’s (2006) findings, which show that a culturally compatible effect is likely to occur through an automatic process. The current research contributes to the literature in several ways. First, previous research on culture shows that under normal cognitive capacity, persuasion appeals in an interpersonal context (advertising) that are compatible with a salient self-construal lead to either favorable (e.g., Martenson, 1987; Hong, Muderrisoglu, & Zinkhan, 1987) or unfavorable attitudes (e.g., Aaker & Williams, 1998). The current research identifies the role persuasion knowledge in the switch of the change of persuasion preference by examining its influence on incompatible, null and compatible effects. Second, this research contributes to the consumer literature by integrating one culturally related concept, self-construal, into the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Previous research on this model has investigated some factors such as cognitive capacity (Morales, 2005) and ulterior motives (Main et al., 2007; Campbell & Kirmani, 2000) but has not examined the cultural influence on the activation of persuasion knowledge which has a direct influence on impression formation of sales agents and on purchase intentions. Finally, the current research demonstrates one way of delineating persuasion attempts through their focus on uniqueness versus commonality. Ingratiation such as flattery and doing a favor are common tactics used by sales agents (Gordon, 1996), yet the psychology and consumer literature has not focused on different ways in which to deliver the same persuasion attempt. The focus on connectedness or distinctiveness may offer potential applications for international companies that have retail stores in different cultures.
Future Direction and Limitations

In the future, as more people experience living in two cultures (bicultural) and react favorably toward both individual and interpersonal persuasion appeals (Lau-Gesk, 2003), it will also be interesting to compare the responses of bicultural and those who have experienced living in only one culture (monocultural). In addition, it could be productive to examine the influence of product conspicuousness (i.e., public vs. private product, Bearden & Etzel, 1982) on impression of sales agents. Finally, future studies may need to explore other culturally related factors, such as uncertainty avoidance.

One of the limitations of this dissertation is the sample. Participants across three studies are all student samples. Future research may need to recruit non-student samples for generalizability purposes. In addition, this research only tests the effect of primed interdependent versus independent self-construal on persuasion attempts. Future studies may consider the situation in which a primed self-construal contradicts an individual’s chronic self-construal and can result in different perceptions of trustworthiness in two different cultures.

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