Can We Turn Off Defensiveness?: Agent Vs. Consumer Responses to Persuasion Attempts

Katherine White, University of British Columbia, Canada
Kelley Main, University of Manitoba, Canada
Wenxia Guo, City University of Hong Kong

We demonstrate the differential response of consumers and agents to persuasion attempts. We find that those with an active agent identity respond to persuasive attempts more accurately in that they are able to correctly detect the presence (vs. absence) of ulterior motives in persuasion contexts and adjust their responses accordingly.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1017733/volumes/v42/NA-42

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Kelley Main, University of Manitoba, Canada
Wenxia Guo, City University of Hong Kong, China
Katherine White, University of British Columbia, Canada

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Past research suggests that individuals have different aspects of identity that can become activated by various elements of the decision context (e.g., Forehand & Deshpandé 2001; White and Argo 2009; White and Dahl 2007). While most of this prior research has examined the salience of an aspect of consumer identity based on their belonging to groups based on ethnicity or gender (Reed II 2004), the current research identifies the importance of an often overlooked identity—that of the agent versus the consumer identity—in determining consumer responses to persuasive attempts. For an individual who has both a consumer and an agent identity, we argue that encounters in the marketplace such as shopping in a retail store are likely to make the agent identity salient. Furthermore, we argue that the activation of agent identity makes targets more motivated to understand the persuasion context accurately, leading them to be more sensitive to important nuances in the persuasion context. As such, agents are predicted to be more attuned to contextual cues in the environment that imply that the source of a persuasion attempt likely has ulterior motives. In contrast, we anticipate that when one’s consumer identity is active, they will take on a defensive stance when processing persuasive messages (DePaulo and DePaulo 1989). This defensive processing style, in turn, leads consumers to pay less attention to the nuances present in the persuasion context and makes them less responsive to persuasive attempts, regardless of whether there is evidence that the source has ulterior motives (Main, Dahl and Darke 2007).

Study 1
This was a 2 (ulterior motive accessibility) × 2 (role) between-subjects design (N = 84, 40% female). A sampling table was set up and was staffed by a male confederate. Half of the participants were told by the confederate that he worked as a consultant for the company that produced the chocolate (high ulterior motive accessibility) and the other half were told that he worked as a research assistant at the university (low ulterior motive accessibility). Once participants were done sampling, they completed a short survey consistent with the cover story. The results demonstrate that those with their agent identity active were perceived to be friendlier and spent more time interacting with the persuasion agent when ulterior motives were low as compared to high. In contrast, when the consumer identity was active, there were no differences as a function of whether ulterior motives were accessible or not.

Study 2
This was a 2 (ulterior motive accessibility) × 4 (role) between-subjects design (N=161, 48% female). Participants self-identified whether or not they had sales experience. Among those participants with sales experience, one third were randomly assigned to be primed with their working role by asking them to list five things that they usually did while working as a sales associate (agent identity activated). An additional third of agents were primed with a consumer role by asking them to list five things that they usually did while shopping as a consumer (consumer identity activated). The remaining third of dual role participants were not primed (no identity activated). A scenario was used where participants were shopping for sunglasses. The accessibility of ulterior motive manipulation occurred through the timing of the persuasion attempt (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Main et al. 2007). The high (low) accessibility of ulterior motives condition had the salesperson making flattering statement before (after) purchasing sunglasses.

Results demonstrate that the differing response of agents as compared to consumers is due in part to the activation of their work identity as agents whose work identity was activated responded in a similar manner as those whose identity was not activated. Further, when an agent’s consumer identity was activated, as opposed to their work identity, this resulted in similar responses as consumers with no experience as an agent.

Study 3
This was a 2 (ulterior motive accessibility) × 2 (role) between-subjects design (N = 113, 41% female). As in Study 1 and 2, participants self-identified whether they had prior sales experience. Agents had an average of 2.0 years of experience. The ulterior motive accessibility was manipulated through an advertising promotion adapted from Folse, Niedrich, and Grau (2010) with a hypothetical brand that uses a cause related marketing campaign. The results of Study 3 replicate the findings previously observed through a different manipulation of ulterior motive accessibility. More importantly, results of the mediated moderation confirm the underlying mechanism of the differing defensive responses based on which identity is activated (agents versus consumers).

Study 4
One question that remains, however, is whether there is a way to make consumers less defensive and more accurate in their assessments of the persuasion context. In this study, we attempt to make consumer responses vary according to the different levels of ulterior motives by getting them to take the perspective of the sales agent. Perspective taking involves the active consideration of alternative points of view (Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000; Laurent and Myers 2011). This was a 2 (ulterior motive accessibility) × 2 (perspective taking) between-subjects design (N = 115; 41% female) with consumers only. This study demonstrates one effective means of making consumers sensitive to varying levels of ulterior motives—by inducing perspective taking. Second, this study demonstrates the mechanism for this moderation effect. That is, when ulterior motive accessibility is low, perspective taking decreases defensive thoughts and increases empathy, which leads to higher trust, greater satisfaction and future interaction intentions.

General Discussion
This research makes a number of contributions to the literature. First, the current work provides a more multifaceted view of how one’s role as an agent versus consumer in the consumption context influences responses to persuasion attempts. Second, we demonstrate that the agent identity is naturally salient in retail settings. Third, we build on the persuasion knowledge literature and demonstrate how identity affects processing motivations. Fourth, we demonstrate that one can prime agents with their consumer identity thereby leading to defensive processing. Fifth, we demonstrate that perspective taking leads consumers to be less defensive in their response to a persuasion attempt.
REFERENCES