Being Correct Or Feeling Protected: a Process Account of the Effect of Personal Control on Product Information Processing
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Two cognitive responses can follow a threat to personal control. The first response, driven by a defense motivation, protects existing product beliefs and yields high confirmatory information processing. The second response, driven by an accuracy motivation, yields more balanced assimilation of incoming product information with one’s existing beliefs.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Recent studies have focused on how individuals restore a sense of structure when their personal control has been threatened (e.g., Cutright 2012). In this vein, the present research investigates how consumers regain structure in their environments during the act of product choice. In contrast to prior research, the present research proposes an in-depth process analysis of the different cognitive strategies that individuals use to regain control and the conditions under which these alternative strategies are adopted.

To study consumer information processing, and, specifically, the manner in which new product information is integrated with prior beliefs, I rely on two decades of research on “information distortion” (for a review, see Russo 2014). The phrase “information distortion” reflects decision makers’ tendency to bias their evaluations of new information to support their emerging product beliefs, resulting in confirmatory information processing bias. For instance, in deciding between two vacation packages (Hotel A and Hotel B) described by several attributes, the first piece of information might be seen as favoring Hotel A. Information distortion occurs if subsequent information is evaluated to favor Hotel A to a greater extent than it should, that is, to a greater extent than if one had seen the same information without an existing preference for Hotel A.

How can threats to personal control impact how new product information is integrated with one’s prior product beliefs? Two streams of research have made conflicting predictions. The first stream contends that individuals are motivated to defend themselves from psychological threats (a “defense” motivation). Thus, a threat to personal control should trigger a cognitive strategy that protects one’s beliefs and favors the appearance of distortion. The second stream, embedded in the selective exposure literature, contends that individuals are motivated to be more vigilant after a threat (an “accuracy” motivation), which should discourage distortion. What conditions trigger these two conflicting motivations? I hypothesize that individuals’ generalized beliefs regarding control (locus of control; Rotter 1966) might influence how they respond to situational threats to personal control. Locus of control refers to the extent to which a person expects a situation to be contingent on his or her own behavior (“internals”) versus fate (“externals”). If internals a) believe that they are in control of their experiences and b) are exposed to a threat to personal control, I hypothesize that they should attempt to process information carefully to allow them to regain control over the situation. In contrast, if externals a) believe that the environment controls them and b) are exposed to a threat to personal control, I hypothesize that their logical response should be to protect themselves against the threat. Overall, following a threat to personal control, externals (vs. internals) are therefore hypothesized to activate a defense motivation (vs. accuracy motivation) and to thereby distort information more to protect their beliefs.

Under a baseline condition in which there is no threat to personal control, what would happen to this hypothesized relationship between locus of control and information distortion? Prior research has shown that internals tend to exhibit higher levels of achievement in nearly all domains (Findley and Cooper 1983). Therefore, internals should have learned to trust their judgment more, suggesting that they might exhibit greater confidence. Because confidence is a known driver of distortion, internals should therefore distort information more than externals under baseline conditions. In summary, the following interaction is hypothesized: under baseline conditions, internals trust their beliefs more than externals do and should therefore exhibit more information distortion (a cognitive explanation), whereas under a threat to personal control, externals activate a defense (vs. accuracy for internals) motivation and therefore exhibit greater confidence and information distortion than internals do (a motivational explanation).

This interaction and its associated mechanism are tested in five studies. All of the studies share similar experimental procedures. First, locus of control is measured using a unidimensional scale, with higher scores reflecting a more internal locus of control (Rotter 1966). Second, a manipulation of threat to personal control is administered (Whitson and Galinsky 2008). Finally, following a manipulation check, all of the participants complete a sequential binary choice task that allows for the measurement of distortion.

Study 1 verifies the predicted interaction between locus of control and a threat to personal control with regard to information distortion. Study 2A tests the hypothesized cognitive and motivational mechanisms, by deactivating (through goal accomplishment) the accuracy and defense goals before the choice task and by comparing the effects of this manipulation on distortion in the presence and absence of a threat. In the absence of a threat to personal control, the typical positive effect of an internal locus of control on information distortion is found to remain unchanged by deactivating goals, confirming that the mechanism is cognitive. Conversely, in the presence of a threat, deactivating the accuracy or defense goal nullifies the impact of locus of control on distortion, confirming that the mechanism is motivational. Study 2B replicates Study 2A. However, instead of inserting manipulation of goal accomplishment, it directly measures the activation level of the defense and the accuracy goals in the act of decision-making, using a recent method developed by Carlson et al. (2014). In the absence of a threat, the relationships between locus of control and both the defense and accuracy measurements are found to be nonsignificant, confirming that the relationship is cognitive. In the presence of a threat, internals are found to activate an accuracy motivation (vs. defense for externals). Finally, Studies 3A and 3B demonstrate that the different information-processing strategies employed by internals and externals drive different choices (Study 3A) and different levels of willingness to pay (Study 3B).

The present study introduces the notion that individuals might not react homogeneously to loss of control. Internals react by adopting an accuracy-motivated strategy, whereas externals react by adopting a defense-motivated strategy. Future research could examine other phenomena that imply a confrontation between beliefs and evidence, such as wishful thinking or the influence of expectations on experience. Such phenomena might be affected by lack of control in a manner similar to information distortion.

REFERENCES