The Informational Value of Dissimilarity in Interpersonal Influence

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We show that advisees don't discount advice received from dissimilar advisors, but use this as information based on which they infer more general dissimilarity, including in the advice domain. Consequently, consumers contrast their opinions and choices away from those of dissimilar advisors. We show the cognitive nature of this process.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Decision makers often seek advice from other people. Whether choosing a holiday destination, a new phone or a movie to see in the weekend, the opinion of other consumers is frequently sought, and consumers increasingly consult the opinions of strangers online. Yet, even in such impoverished relational contexts, consumers are nevertheless inclined to draw inferences about the advisor in order to value the advice more accurately (Hamilton, Vohs, and McGill 2014). One prominent inference is whether the advisor is similar or dissimilar to oneself, and previous research extensively documents the positive impact of perceived similarity (e.g., Gino, Shang, and Croson 2009; Naylor, Poynor, and Norton 2011). However, the question of whether and how dissimilar advisors influence the opinions and decisions of the advisee has received far less attention. Ever since Festinger (1954) argued that the influence of advisors on advisees decreases with increasing dissimilarity and that the impact of dissimilar advisors can be ignored, this notion has dominated the literature.

Based on the vast literature documenting the impact of a wide variety of (objectively irrelevant) contextual cues on preferences and decision making, we propose that perceptions of dissimilarity are not always discounted but will be used as informational cues in the preference formation process. Specifically, we argue that perceptions of dissimilarity in one domain will be used to infer more general dissimilarity, including in domains that are unrelated to the initial domain in which dissimilarity was perceived. These perceptions of dissimilarity are used to infer that one’s own preference is likely distinct from the advisor’s opinion. Consequently, we propose that advisees do use the advice received from dissimilar advisors, but as information about what they do not want instead of what they want. This results in a development of their preferences in a direction opposite of the advice received—the differentiation account.

We argue that the notion of advice discounting has dominated the literature because many research findings are in line with this theory. However, the discounting account provides a valid alternative explanation for these findings as it predicts the exact same outcomes within the research contexts that are typically used. A more positive attitude after a positive recommendation from a similar versus a dissimilar advisor is consistent with the discounting account, but equally consistent with predictions we would make based on the differentiation account. We identify two settings that allow us to distinguish between both accounts. In the first two studies (N_{study1} = 160; N_{study2} = 240), we examine participants’ preferences after a recommendation from a similar versus a dissimilar advisor in a fixed choice context—participants could choose between two different research tasks. While the discounting account would predict preference reversal for the recommended versus non-recommended option, the differentiation account predicts preference reversals as a consequence of dissimilarity of the advisor. Similarity was manipulated within the attitudinal domain (among others based on either similar or different preferences for jokes and paintings), with a procedure adopted from Ames (2012). Indeed, participants were more likely to choose the recommended research task when the advisor was similar (65% choose the recommended task), but their preferences reversed when the advisor was dissimilar and they were more likely to choose the non-recommended research task (60%; \chi^2_{study1}(1) = 8.31, p = .004; \chi^2_{study2}(1) = 12.96, p < .001). Mediation analyses show that this effect is driven by a difference in perceived similarity and not by differences in liking.

People predominantly use (irrelevant) contextual cues in their decision making when they lack more objective information, and we expect this to moderate the impact of dissimilarity on preferences. In Study 2, we manipulate whether the recommendation contains objective information (about the content of the research task) and find that the tendency for preference reversals as a consequence of dissimilarity diminishes when the recommendation itself is perceived as relatively more informative. Finally, in Study 3 we examine the impact of dissimilarity in another setting that allows us to discriminate between the differentiation and the discounting account—positive versus negative recommendations for holiday destinations. While the discounting account predicts relatively minor differences in attitudes after a positive versus negative recommendation from a dissimilar advisor, we propose and find that people are actually more positive (M = 5.72, SD = 1.35) after a negative as compared to after a positive recommendation (M = 4.84, SD = 1.60) from a dissimilar advisor, F(1,65) = 7.61, p < .01. Further, the idea that people will use dissimilarity as information in their preference formation based on which they infer what they do not want implies that this requires a relative intense cognitive process. People have to mentally reverse the information received from the dissimilar advisor in order to infer their own (opposite) preferences, which requires intense processing (Gilbert, Tafarodi, and Malone 1993). This implies that the preference reversal should occur predominantly when people are in an analytical mindset, but diminish when people are in a more superficial processing mindset, focused on intuition and feelings. Study 3 provides evidence for this moderation by processing mindset, F(1,65) = 5.67, p = .02. Finding stronger differentiation effects when people are in an analytical (versus an emotional) mindset also further confirms that this differentiation is not driven by more affective or motivational processes (Hilmert, Kulik, and Christenfeld 2006).

Our results contradict the notion of advice discounting and show that people use the opinion of dissimilar advisors as information in their preference formation. Rather than following the recommendation, people infer that their preferences in the recommendation domain are opposite as well. We provide evidence for the underlying process and show that these effects are not driven by motivational processes or differences in liking. The current findings have important implications. Theoretically, they point at the (to date overlooked) importance of dissimilarity in persuasion and provide a valid alternative explanation for many research findings that have been interpreted as consistent with the discounting account. Practically, they show that perceptions of dissimilarity can unintentionally have adverse consequences for persuasion effectiveness.

REFERENCES


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