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Beyond Skepticism: Can Accessing Persuasion Knowledge Bolster Credibility?

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Most persuasion knowledge research has shown that persuasion knowledge access is associated with skepticism. In contrast, we demonstrate that persuasion knowledge access can lead to greater credibility (rather than skepticism), and that high (vs. low) persuasion knowledge access can sometimes bolster evaluations of a persuasive agent and its offering.

[to cite]:

Mathew S. Isaac and Kent Grayson (2015) ," Beyond Skepticism: Can Accessing Persuasion Knowledge Bolster Credibility?", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 43, eds. Kristin Diehl and Carolyn Yoon, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 570-571.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1020172/volumes/v43/NA-43>

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

As defined by Friestad and Wright (1994), persuasion knowledge is personal knowledge that consumers develop about persuasion attempts, and which consumers use whenever they believe they are targets of persuasion. Friestad and Wright's (1994) foundational article on persuasion knowledge has influenced an exceptionally wide range of research projects, as demonstrated in part by a citation count exceeding 1,500 on Google Scholar. To date, researchers have tended to emphasize that persuasion knowledge is primarily associated with consumer skepticism, and that the main role of persuasion knowledge is to help consumers defend themselves against persuasion attempts. For example, Friestad and Wright's (1994) Persuasion Knowledge Model has been used to support claims that consumers "are generally skeptical of marketer's efforts to persuade them" (Buell and Norton 2011, 1578), and that consumers "are automatically somewhat skeptical of advertising" (Dahlen 2005, 90). Authors have similarly argued that accessing persuasion knowledge "usually entails ... skepticism toward advertising claims" (Kirmani and Zhu 2007, 689), raises consumers' "cognitive defenses" (Russell 2002), and leads consumers "to question the credibility" of advertising claims (Xu and Wyer 2010).

Previous research establishing this link between persuasion knowledge and skepticism has produced useful insights about how, when, and why consumers respond to persuasion attempts. Yet, past work has also tended to downplay or overlook an important aspect of the Persuasion Knowledge Model: According to Friestad and Wright (1994), the main function of persuasion knowledge is not primarily to foster skepticism when consumers realize they are the target of a persuasion attempt, but more generally to help consumers glean useful, goal-relevant information from persuasion attempts. If a consumer can cope with a persuasion attempt by trusting the marketer and believing the message, this is the opposite of skepticism, which, as noted above, has been defined and operationalized as mistrust in the marketer and/or disbelief in the marketing message. We refer to the opposite of skepticism as *credibility* (e.g., Soman and Cheema 2002; Tsfati 2010; Tsfati and Cappella 2003), which has been conceptualized and operationalized in terms of trust and belief (Agrawal and Maheswaran 2005; Giffin 1967). Thus, skepticism and credibility are two poles on a continuum, with disbelief / mistrust on one side and belief / trust on the other.

In this paper, we extend persuasion knowledge research by demonstrating that while increased access to persuasion knowledge can lead to greater skepticism, it can sometimes bolster credibility instead. Specifically, we show that persuasion attempts can sometimes meet the consumer's expectations for trustworthy and believable information and that, as a result, persuasion knowledge access can increase the positive effects of this information on subsequent evaluations. To our knowledge, this work is the first to empirically and explicitly demonstrate that, instead of leading to greater skepticism and lower evaluations, increased persuasion knowledge access can lead to higher credibility and therefore higher evaluations.

We argue that the frequent empirical association reported between persuasion knowledge access and skepticism has been encouraged by two methodological issues. One is the selection of tactics for consumer experiments that have encouraged skeptical responses. Many of the tactics selected for study in persuasion

knowledge research have tended to have a natural association with deception, manipulation, or distortion (e.g., price gouging, flattery, etc.), and that these stimuli therefore naturally encourage skepticism. In our studies, we explicitly compare the effects of tactics associated with skepticism versus the effects of tactics associated with credibility (based on a pre-test of various tactics). The second methodological issue is the use of persuasion knowledge manipulations in experiments that may have fostered skepticism among participants (e.g., encouraging participants to consider profit motives, reading news articles that increase suspicion etc.). In contrast to these "narrow" manipulations, we designed and pre-tested a new "broad" manipulation that encourages persuasion knowledge access, but which places equal weight on the alternative poles of skepticism and credibility: "Please think about why the [persuasion agent] took this particular approach in developing and implementing this [persuasion attempt]. Think about the considerations that might have led the [persuasion agent] to create this kind of [persuasion attempt]. Keep in mind that some [persuasion agents] use [persuasion attempts] to truthfully communicate information. Other [persuasion agents] use [persuasion attempts] to trick or mislead customers."

In three experiments, we demonstrate that when a persuasive agent uses a credible tactic, high (vs. low) persuasion knowledge access can lead the agent and its offering to be evaluated more favorably. Studies 1 and 2 shared a similar purpose. We wanted to replicate prior research showing that when tactics are generally associated with skepticism, the high (vs. low) likelihood of persuasion knowledge access may lead consumers to view a persuasive message and/or the source of a persuasion attempt less favorably, thus lowering evaluations. However, we aimed to also show that when tactics are generally associated with credibility, high (vs. low) persuasion knowledge may sometimes lead consumers to view a persuasive message and/or the source of a persuasion attempt as being more credible, thus boosting evaluations. Whereas we manipulated tactic credibility in Study 1 by using different tactics (that our pre-test suggested were associated with either skepticism or credibility), we manipulated tactic credibility in study 2 by using an identical credible tactic but varying source credibility. Past research has shown that perceptions of source credibility affect perceptions of tactic credibility (e.g., Goldberg and Hartwick 1990; Srivastava and Chakravarti 2009); thus, we viewed our study 2 manipulation as an indirect tactic credibility manipulation. In study 3, we aimed to show that whereas our new "broad" persuasion knowledge manipulation was capable of boosting evaluations (relative to a control group that was less likely to have accessed persuasion knowledge), "narrow" persuasion knowledge access manipulations commonly used in prior research might decrease evaluations (relative to the control) because the manipulation itself induces skepticism.

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