Consumer Endorsements: When and How Do Consumers Remember Their Own Misleading Recommendations?

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Consumers are often encouraged to recommend brands (i.e. "like us" on Facebook). On occasion, consumers endorse brands that they don't really like. We look at the consequences of lying on memory and find that the heightened arousal during the communication of a lie that improves memory for the misleading recommendation.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers are often encouraged to recommend brands (i.e. “like us” on Facebook). On some occasions, particularly when incentivized, consumers may endorse brands that they don’t really like very much. An interesting question is when and how do consumers remember their own misleading recommendations? Remembering previous endorsements, and the veracity of the endorsements, is important as the remembered endorsements may affect future decisions and word-of-mouth. The research reported here contributes to the growing interest in consumers lying to other consumers and to marketing/service professionals (Anthony and Cowley, 2012; Argo and Shiv, 2010; Argo, White, and Dahl, 2006; Sengupta, Dahl, and Gorn 2002) and the ensuing consequences. We discuss deception, arousal, and autobiographical memory research to support our hypothesis that heightened arousal, caused by the act of lying, improves memory for the misleading information communicated.

DECEPTION AND AROUSAL

Most people consider themselves to be moral (Mazar, Amir, and Ariely, 2008) and are motivated to behave in a manner consistent with their moral identity (Stets and Carter, 2011). However, the pursuit of social or personal goals often requires the communication of deceptive information (Mazar and Ariely 2006; Mazar and Hawkins, 2015). Given that communicating deceptive information in the form of telling a lie is believed to be immoral (Spranca, Minsk, and Baron, 1991), a conflict emerges for the liar (Mazar and Ariely, 2006). Moral conflict has been shown to increase the activation of the autonomic nervous system, or arousal, in the liar (Karim et al. 2010).

It is important to note, that not all lies are alike with respect to the conflict created and the resulting arousal felt by the liar. Previous research has made a distinction between lies of commission where details, known to be false, are communicated as true and lies of omission where details are purposefully concealed with the intent to mislead (Bok, 1978). Importantly, people consider lies of commission to be more immoral (Spranca, Minsk, and Baron, 1991) and as such, commission lies are associated with a greater discrepancy between moral self and the act of lying. Given the increased conflict between what the liar believes to be a moral action and how the liar is behaving (Mazar, Amir, and Ariely, 2008), arousal should be greater for commission lies compared to omission lies.

AROUSAL AND MEMORY

Autobiographical memory research has shown that emotionally- arousing events are better remembered than non-emotional events (Conway et al. 1994). One explanation for improved memory of emotional event information is that arousal narrows attention and favors processing of the emotion-eliciting information, which results in better memory for details central to the emotional aspects of an event compared to details peripheral to the emotional component of an event (Burke, Heuer, and Reisberg 1992; Easterbrook 1959). Based on this reasoning, we hypothesize that when lies involve heightened arousal due to a moral conflict, memory for the lie should be more accurate because the lie is central to the communication.

Another theoretical explanation for improved memory of emotional events is priority binding (Hadley and MacKay, 2006). According to priority binding, emotional arousal during encoding encourages stronger binding of the information central to the emotional event to the episodic context (peripheral, non-lie information) because it facilitates retrieval. Therefore in contrast to an attention-narrowing account, a priority-binding explanation would predict that arousal felt when lying should enhance memory for both central and peripheral information. We include tests and measures to reveal whether attention narrowing or priority binding better explains the data.

PRESENT RESEARCH

In four studies we provide evidence that consumers who offer misleading endorsements (to gain financially or because they are under social pressure) have significantly more accurate memory for the content of their false recommendation when the consequences of their lie are greater. In each study participants record a false recommendation for a marketer (study 1) or a friend (studies 2–4). We manipulate (or measure) the consequences of the lie and measure memory for the recorded message one day later. In studies 1 and 2, lies of commission (pre-tested to be more consequential than omission lies in terms of moral conflict, n = 51) result in more accurate memory for the content of the lie than lies of omission. In studies 3 and 4, we manipulate the consequences directly via a stakes manipulation adapted from DePaulo, Lanier, and Davis (1983) and find the same result. Results from all studies show that liars in high consequence conditions remember the content of their false recommendation more accurately and that the effect is mediated by heightened arousal. We also show that that memory for peripheral details is less accurate for liars in high consequence conditions. In other words, we find a trade-off between memory for central and peripheral details which supports the attention narrowing explanation. The results essentially eliminate the priority binding explanation. We also eliminate the alternative explanation that any type of arousal improves deception memory.

CONCLUSION

The results reported here offer insight into when and why consumers remember – or forget – the misleading endorsements they provide. Given that arousal heightens and attention narrows at the point of communicating the misleading endorsement, particularly for liars by commission, it is possible that from a moral balancing perspective (Nisan, 1991), the consumer may attempt to ‘compensate’ or ‘correct’ for their inflated memory for the deceptive endorsement, by communicating less positive recommendations or word-of-mouth about the brand in the future. It is also possible that liars by omission actually become more positive about the brand and behave more like an advocate. Our findings provide the first step towards understanding how deceptive endorsements affect consumer behavior by focusing on consumers’ memory biases for the misleading information they have communicated. In addition to examining the consequences for WOM communication, future research will determine how memory for false endorsements affects consumers’ satisfaction for the brand/service provider, repeat patronage and loyalty.
REFERENCES


