Confidence Focuses You on the Forest, Doubt Turns You to the Tree: Confidence, Construal Frame, and Information Processing

Derek D. Rucker, Northwestern University
Echo Wen Wan, University of Hong Kong

A large literature demonstrates that a state of confidence reduces information processing compared to a state of doubt. This paper presents an alternative formulation that either confidence or doubt can increase or decrease information processing based on the construal of information. We propose that feeling relatively confident activates an abstract level of construal, whereas feeling relatively doubtful activates a concrete level of construal, and that states of doubt increase processing when information is framed in a concrete manner, whereas states of confidence increase processing when information is framed in an abstract manner. Four experiments test these propositions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

An extensive literature suggests that states of confidence, compared to states of doubt (Kruglanski 1989), decrease information processing efforts (e.g., Edwards 2003; Weary and Jacobson 1997). For example, Weary and Jacobson (1997) found that people feeling doubtful engaged in greater information processing than those feeling confident. The main explanation for these findings is that feeling doubtful prompts individuals to infer that they have insufficient knowledge, which motivates them to engage in systematical information processing (Chaiken, Liberman, and Eagly 1989; Wood and Lynch 2002). In contrast, feeling confident prompts individuals to infer that they have sufficient knowledge so that they do not need to engage in careful information processing. The present research questions how pervasive the association between doubt (confidence) and increased (decreased) information processing is, and propose that the psychological states of confidence and doubt might evoke qualitatively different thinking with respect to their levels of construal (Trope and Liberman 2003).

According to the traditional explanation for the difference in information processing between confidence and doubt, these states affect whether people rely on preexisting general knowledge structures or focus on the specific data in the current situation to tackle problems (Chaiken et al. 1989). When individuals feel confident, they are certain about the sufficiency of their knowledge, and thus tend to rely on pre-existing knowledge that typically consists of general knowledge and global information. In contrast, when feeling doubtful, individuals are uncertain about whether they have enough knowledge, which prompts them to focus on the low-level details and contextual information. Research on construal level proposes that thinking about general knowledge and global schematic information, as done by confident people, activates abstract construals. Abstract construals are characterized as constructing schematic, decontextualized representations, and containing goal-related features. In contrast, thinking about low-level details and contextualized information, as done by doubtful people, activates concrete construals. Concrete construals consist of unstructured, contextualized representations, and include means-related features (Trope and Liberman 2003). We thus posit that confidence will lead to abstract construals, whereas doubt will lead to concrete construals. Although not tested explicitly, this proposition is consistent with several findings in the literature. Research on action identification theory (Vallacher and Wegner 1987) finds that people are more likely to focus on the low-level details in thinking when handling difficult activities that might be associated with doubt. Research on power suggests that feeling powerful is a psychological state associated with confidence (Brinol et al. 2007). A state of high power has been linked to abstract thinking (Smith and Trope 2006). The association between confidence and power and that between power and abstract thinking again hint at the possibility that confidence might be linked with abstract construals. Recent research in psychology and marketing has soundly documented that the depth of information processing is increased when the target message is framed in a way that matches individuals’ personal characteristics or psychological states (e.g., Tormala et al. 2008; Wheeler, Petty, and Bizer 2005). For example, Tormala et al. (2008) found that confident participants engaged in greater processing than doubtful participants when the message had a confidence frame, because this frame matched their psychological state of confidence. Based on our proposition that psychological states of confidence and doubt activate abstract and concrete construals, we posit that the level of information processing will increase when there is a matching between individuals’ confidence level (confidence vs. doubt) and the message frame associated with construals (abstract vs. concrete construals) than when there is a mismatch.

Four experiments examined our propositions. In experiment 1, participants were first induced to feel confident or doubtful by reading advertisements that highlighted either confidence or doubt, and then completed the Behavioral Identification Form (BIF, Vallacher and Wegner 1989), a scale widely used to assess individuals’ construal levels. The result shows that participants who were primed to feel confident scored higher on the BIF measure than participants who were primed to feel doubtful, supporting our proposition that confident leads to abstract construals compared with doubt. Experiment 2 tests the proposed relationship between confidence/doubt and construal levels using a different approach. Participants first received the same confidence/doubt manipulation as used in experiment 1, and then indicated their preference between two guest lectures, one having high desirability but low feasibility, and the other having high feasibility but low desirability. Desirability is associated with more abstract construals and feasibility with more concrete construals (Trope and Liberman 2003). This study shows that confident participants exhibited a greater preference for the lecture with high desirability than doubtful participants, again supporting our proposed link between confidence/doubt and construals. Experiments 3 and 4 test the matching effect between psychological confidence and message frame associated with construals in product evaluation contexts. Experiment 3 primed participants’ level of confidence in a recall task and then exposed them to messages about a hotel. The messages described the task as booking a hotel for a trip next week (near future) that was associated with concrete construals or six month away (distant future) that was associated with abstract construals. The target hotel was described either in strong or weak arguments (Petty et al. 1993). The results show that when the hotel message was framed in concrete construals, the difference in hotel attitudes between strong and weak arguments conditions for doubtful participants was greater than that for confident participants, which replicate the classic effect that confidence undermines information processing as compared with doubt. However, the opposite pattern was documented when the hotel was framed in abstract construals. These findings support that the matching between confidence (doubt) and abstract construals (concrete construal) increases information process compared with a mismatching. Experiment 4 replicated the finding documented in experiment 3 by using goal-related (abstract construals) versus means-related
(concrete construals) descriptions in framing the message about a fitness club. Experiment 4 also found that elaboration mediated the matching effect. This research contributes to literature by providing a new theoretical perspective and offering better understandings about the difference in the thinking style activated by psychological confidence versus doubt and its impact on information processing.

REFERENCES


