Does Curiosity Make Consumers Less Critical? Effects of Ad-Induced Curiosity on Persuasion Knowledge and Counterarguing

Verena Hüttl-Maack, University of Hohenheim, Germany
Jana Daume, University of Hohenheim, Germany

Prior findings suggest that curious consumers process information more intensely, which might also make them more critical. However, our four studies demonstrate the opposite. Consumers become less critical when a curiosity-triggering element is embedded in an advertisement. We argue they are distracted from the persuasion attempt while resolving their curiosity.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Prior findings suggest that curious people direct their attention to curiosity-evoking stimuli (Isikman et al. 2016) and process information more intensely (e.g., Kang et al. 2009; Marvin and Shohamy 2016; Menon and Soman 2002). Thus, one could expect consumers to elaborate advertising content more critical and to be more alert about persuasion attempts when curious. However, we propose the opposite and explain this by the emotional tension urging people to resolve curiosity (Litman 2005), which might distract consumers from the persuasion attempt. Advertisements typically comprise different elements (Kumar 2000) with different functions (e.g., catching attention or conveying a persuasive message), and consumers will allocate most of their available cognitive resources to the curiosity-evoking aspect (Kashdan and Silvia 2009). Since cognitive resources are limited, resolving curiosity competes for consumers’ attention with, for example, the selling arguments. Current research shows that a curiosity-evoking event (e.g., phone ringing) diverts attention from an experiential activity (e.g., watching a film) (Isikman et al. 2016). We posit that this can also occur when the curiosity-evoking element and a concurrent message are embedded within the same stimulus. Similarly, humorous elements in advertisements reduce resistance to persuasion because it draws the attention of consumers (Strick et al. 2012). Our major research question is whether experiencing ad-induced curiosity leads to a less-critical consumer response, increased persuasion, and a more favorable effect on attitude. Furthermore, we presume a rather general effect and posit that the favorability of an offer does not play a role in the proposed effect. In a series of four studies, we investigate these assumptions.

In the first study, the participants (N = 66) were approached in front of a shopping center in a large city and either saw a favorable or an unfavorable offer for a coffee machine. In both conditions, we applied the same curiosity-inducing procedure by creating an information gap (Loewenstein 1994) first and providing more information later (e.g., Menon and Soman 2002). Thus, respondents saw a teaser ad revealing neither the product nor any detailed information. After rating their momentary curiosity, they saw a second ad containing more details. Then, we assessed their persuasion knowledge (Kirmani and Zhu 2007). We used bootstrapping (PROCESS, Hayes 2018) and found that ad-induced curiosity reduced consumer’s persuasion knowledge (i.e., less skepticism toward the ad content) (b = -.48, t(62) = -3.22, p < .01). This effect occurred independently of the attractiveness of the offer (b = .14, t(62) = .61, ns).

In the second study (N = 283), we surveyed customers of a cosmetics company online. We applied the same basic curiosity-inducing procedure as in Study 1 and created a teaser ad for a new gift box. In addition to the measures of Study 1, we assessed their attitude toward the product. A mediation model (Hayes 2018) provided evidence that ad-induced curiosity reduced persuasion knowledge (b = -.16, CI: [-.23, -.10]) and because persuasion knowledge negatively affects attitude (b = -.42, CI: [-.52, -.31]), the overall effect of curiosity is positive (CI: [.03, .11]).

In the third study (N = 161), we manipulated varying levels of curiosity and operationalized consumers’ skepticism differently. We created a 2 (curiosity: low, high) × 2 (offer-favorability: unfavorable, favorable) between-subjects design and invited students to our online survey about an airline offer. For both curiosity conditions, we applied a similar procedure as previously described. However, in the low-curiosity conditions, the offer details were already revealed in the first step. In addition to the prior measures, we asked respondents to list all their thoughts (Kirmani and Zhu 2007) after each step of information disclosure. Two independent coders counted the number of counterarguments against the offer. This represents a more conservative measure and avoids demand effects. As expected, curiosity reduces counterarguing (b = -1.30, p < .001), which further affects the attitude toward the offer (b = -1.33, p < .001), without reducing the total number of thoughts. The effect does not depend on the offer’s favorability (index of moderated mediation CI: [-.60, .08]).

The fourth study (N = 192) replicates the mediation of counterarguing and extends the investigation of curiosity’s underlying processes by examining a co-occurring emotional reaction. Again, curiosity was systematically manipulated, and different brands were included as a replication factor. The online study followed a 2 (curiosity: low, high) × 3 (brand replication factor) between-subjects design. We again applied the stepwise information-disclosing procedure and created a fictitious advertisement for a frozen pizza offered by one of two well-known brands or by both in cooperation. We additionally assessed two positive emotions (satisfaction and enthusiasm) after the second step. Two-way ANOVAs demonstrated that respondents in the high-curiosity condition generated fewer counterarguments, more positive emotions, and a higher attitude (all p < .01). The number of total thoughts was not affected. For all investigated variables, the interaction with the brand replication factor was not significant.

Finally, a multiple-mediation model found evidence for the indirect effects of both counterarguing (CI: [.05, .34]) and positive emotions (CI: [.08, .59]).

Our results show that although prior findings generally propose a more intense processing of information under curiosity, the attention-drawing potential of a curiosity-evoking advertising element distracts consumers from a persuasive attempt. These results extend findings on the evaluation of stimuli in a state of curiosity (e.g., Isikman et al. 2016; Marvin and Shohamy 2006; Menon and Soman 2002), and provide insights into the allocation of attention to different elements of a stimulus. However, future research should examine this allocation process more deeply, perhaps using eye-tracking and qualitative methods. Moreover, by showing a parallel mediation of specific positive emotions, this research builds on previous findings on the positive affective processes resulting from curiosity resolution (Ruan, Hsee, and Lu 2018). From these results, double-edged implications for curiosity-triggering advertisements can be derived. On the one hand, curiosity helps marketers to promote the advertised content. On the other hand, it might be important for policymakers to protect consumers from accepting an offer without a careful assessment of its potential pitfalls.

REFERENCES


