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Research Article

Confidence via correction: The effect of judgment correction on consumer confidence

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Abstract

At times, consumers are motivated to reduce the influence of a product recommendation on their judgments. Based on previous research, it is unclear whether this correction process will increase or decrease consumers' confidence in their judgments. We find that source credibility moderates the effect of correction on confidence: correction decreases confidence when a product recommendation comes from a high credibility source but increases confidence when the same message comes from a low credibility source. As a result, correction increases the effectiveness of recommendations from low credibility sources on purchase intentions. Notably, this "confidence via correction" effect is further moderated by elaboration, such that the effect is attenuated for high elaboration consumers. Our results have implications for understanding consumers' reactions to persuasive messages and for both marketing practitioners and consumer protection agencies using correction cues to influence message persuasiveness.

Keywords: Confidence; Correction; Credibility; Persuasion; Advertising

Introduction

Consumers are often bombarded with persuasive messages recommending products. At times, consumers are motivated to correct their judgments, meaning that they try to reduce the influence of biasing factors on their judgments. Correction processes occur when consumers believe that their judgments have been influenced (Meyers-Levy & Malaviya, 1999; Tormala & Petty, 2004) and can be instigated in several ways such as via explicit instructions to correct (Wegener & Petty, 1995), disclosures (Johar & Simmons, 2000) or contextual information that calls consumers' attention to potentially biasing information (Schwarz & Bless, 1992). For example, after reading an advertisement recommending a product, a consumer might be warned by a friend to avoid being influenced by the manufacturer's opinion.

In this paper, we examine how prompting consumers to correct their judgments for the influence of a product recommendation affects consumers' confidence about their judgments of the recommended product. It is important to understand shifts in confidence because confidence can directly affect consumers' behavior (Tsai & McGill, 2011). Confidence has been found to affect delays in purchasing (Greenleaf & Lehmann, 1995), willingness to pay (Thomas & Menon, 2007), behavioral intentions (Barden & Petty, 2008), and likelihood of purchasing an advertised product (Wan, Rucker, Tormala, & Clarkson, 2010). Thus, correction prompts that increase or decrease consumers' confidence may have important implications for their purchase intentions and behavior.

Previous research has not explicitly examined the effect of correcting for the recommender's influence on consumer confidence, and examination of the literature leads to mixed predictions about the direction of the effect. It has been suggested both

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that correction may decrease confidence (Tormala, DeSensi, & Petty, 2007) and that it may increase confidence (Meyers-Levy & Malaviya, 1999; Tormala & Petty, 2004). We identify a moderator to reconcile these competing predictions and clarify how correction cues affect consumers' confidence. Building upon work on flexible correction processes (e.g., Wegener & Petty, 1995), we hypothesize that the effect of correction on confidence depends on how consumers believe they were influenced. We test this moderator in a series of five studies.

Because consumers believe high and low credibility sources influence their judgments differently, we find that correction decreases confidence when a message comes from a high credibility source such as an independent agency but increases confidence when a message comes from a low credibility source such as a marketer or manufacturer. As a result, correction cues tend to boost purchase intentions after consumers receive a recommendation from a low credibility source. We call this the "confidence via correction" effect. We also show that the confidence via correction effect is moderated by elaboration. Because high elaboration consumers believe they are influenced less by credibility cues than low elaboration consumers, high elaboration consumers correct their judgments less than low elaboration consumers. Thus, low elaboration consumers (e.g., those who are distracted) are particularly susceptible to being influenced by messages from low credibility sources when they correct their judgments. In the next section, we provide the rationale for our predictions.

Theoretical background

The effect of correcting for the recommender's influence on consumer confidence

Sometimes consumers may be motivated to reconsider their judgments following a product recommendation. For example, after visiting an auto showroom, a consumer may be warned by a friend to avoid being influenced by the salesperson. She may then attempt to update or "correct" for the influence of the salesperson on her evaluation of the cars. This correction process offers interesting implications for marketing because it suggests that consumer judgments are changeable even after they are formed (Meyers-Levy & Malaviya, 1999).

Models of correction processes propose that when individuals believe they have been influenced, they "reset" their judgments (Set/Reset model; Martin, 1986) or "exclude" this information from their judgments (Inclusion/Exclusion model; Schwarz & Bless, 1992). The Flexible Correction Model adds to this literature the idea that individuals correct their judgments based on their naïve theories about how they have been influenced (Wegener & Petty, 1995; Wegener, Petty, Smoak, & Fabrigar, 2004). Thus, to correct their judgments consumers must have some intuition about whether and how the source of the recommendation affected them (Wilson & Brekke, 1994). When attempting to eliminate a perceived bias, people correct in the direction opposite to which they believe they have been influenced, regardless of the actual influence (Wegener & Petty, 1995). For example, if consumers believe that a liked (disliked) source produces more (less) favorable pre-correction judgments, correcting for the influence of a liked (disliked) source should make consumers' post-correction judgments less (more) favorable (Petty, Wegener, & White, 1998).

While previous research has demonstrated the effect of correction on judgments such as attitudes and behavioral intentions (for a review, see Wegener et al., 2004), little is known about the effect of correction on second order cognitive processes (i.e., thoughts about thoughts; Briñol, Rucker, Tormala, & Petty, 2004) such as the confidence with which consumers hold judgments. To date, it is not clear how correction may affect the subjective experience of confidence, if at all (Nussinson & Koriat, 2008), and examination of the literature leads to two competing predictions. One prediction is that being prompted to correct one's judgments will consistently decrease confidence. This view builds on research suggesting that correction cues highlight potential bias. When potential bias is made salient, consumers may think they have based their opinions on illegitimate information and, as a consequence, become less certain about their judgments (Tormala et al., 2007). A second prediction is that being prompted to correct one's judgments will consistently increase confidence. This view builds on the argument that correction induces consumers to engage in further processing to form their final judgment, which should increase their confidence (Meyers-Levy & Malaviya, 1999).

Consistent with recent theories of correction suggesting that the direction of correction is contingent on the believed influence of the context (Wegener & Petty, 1995; Wegener et al., 2004), we propose a third possibility. We hypothesize that correction may either decrease or increase consumers' confidence depending upon how consumers appraise the influence. Specifically, we identify a moderator, source credibility, which allows us to reconcile these competing predictions and test the underlying process.

Moderation by source credibility

Source credibility is the degree to which a source is believed to be expert and trustworthy in communicating accurate and truthful information (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). The trustworthiness component of credibility has been shown to be intrinsically associated with certainty (Sorrentino, Holmes, Hanna, & Sharp, 1995). More generally, high source credibility increases the confidence consumers have in their thoughts about an advertised product (Briñol, Petty, & Tormala, 2004) and the confidence associated with a decision (Fitzsimons & Lehman, 2004) because consumers perceive information from credible sources to be more valid (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Kruglanski & Thompson, 1999). Consumers may feel more (less) confident in response to high (low) credibility information even if the favorability of their opinions is unchanged (Briñol, Petty, et al., 2004).

Research on correction finds that consumers correct when they a) are motivated and able to correct, b) perceive a biasing influence, and c) hold beliefs about the direction of influence (Petty et al., 1998; Wegener & Petty, 1995, 1997). When consumers are motivated to correct their judgments, they evaluate the