



Research Review

Consumer conviction and commitment: An appraisal-based framework for attitude certainty

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Abstract

This paper explores consumers' commitment to and conviction about their beliefs in the form of attitude certainty. Based on a review of past research, we present a new framework for understanding attitude certainty and how consumers' attitude certainty is shaped by their resisting or yielding to persuasive messages, or even by their reflections on the evidence supporting their attitudes. We propose that attitude certainty is formed and changed largely through an attribution-based reasoning process linked to a finite set of distinct appraisals. Our framework is used to both organize past research and offer guidance for future research endeavors. In addition, we distinguish our framework of appraisal-based attitude certainty from past models in attitudes and persuasion research that have referenced or taken note of the attitude certainty construct. Implications and future directions for the study of consumer behavior are discussed.

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Introduction

A fundamental goal of consumer psychology is to understand and predict consumer behavior. In service of this objective, consumer psychologists have long recognized the importance of understanding consumers' *attitudes*—that is, their global evaluative assessments of products or brands (see Petty & Briñol, 2008, for a review). Indeed, over the years researchers from many different perspectives have offered converging support for the importance of attitudes in affecting consumers' behavior (e.g., Sheppard, Jon, & Warshaw, 1988), their information processing (e.g., Maheswaran & Sternthal, 1990), and even their basic perception (e.g., Fazio, Ledbetter, & Towles-Schwen, 2000). As a consequence, the study of attitudes and persuasion has become woven into the fabric of consumer behavior research.

A rapidly expanding literature in consumer psychology suggests that to truly understand behavior one must also understand attitude certainty. Attitude certainty refers to *the subjective sense of conviction one has about one's attitude, or the extent to which one believes one's attitude is correct or valid* (e.g., Gross, Holtz, & Miller, 1995; Petty, Briñol, Tormala, & Wegener, 2007). Certainty is a metacognitive tag on an attitude that reflects a secondary assessment (i.e., "Is my evaluation correct?") of a primary cognition (i.e., the evaluation

itself; Petty & Briñol, 2006).¹ Even when a persuasive effort (e.g., an advertisement or an interpersonal appeal) does not produce attitude change (i.e., it does not modify the valence or extremity of an attitude), the appeal can have important but previously hidden effects on attitude certainty.

Contributions and objectives of the present review

The current review introduces a new framework outlining the appraisal-based processes through which attitude certainty can be formed or altered, and generates new directions for future research. Although attitude certainty has been reviewed elsewhere (see Gross et al., 1995; Petty, Tormala, & Rucker, 2004; Tormala & Rucker, 2007), the present paper departs from these past efforts in several key ways. First, whereas prior reviews discuss some variables that affect certainty, the present review provides a more comprehensive list and, more importantly, explores *why* particular variables affect attitude certainty. We introduce, for the first time, six specific appraisals consumers use to form attitude certainty

¹ When describing certainty, scholars have used synonymous terms including confidence, commitment, and correctness (Gross et al., 1995). Although other meanings of attitude certainty can be construed (e.g., attitude clarity; Petrocelli et al., 2007; see also Cohen & Reed, 2006), we focus on perceived validity or correctness in this review as this approach covers the treatment of certainty in the bulk of the contemporary literature.

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