DIFFERENT APPROACH TO THE THEORY OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE: PERCEPTION OF A DISSONANT CONSUMER DEPENDING ON HER GROUP BELONGING

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Summary

Although marketers have long been interested in the theory of cognitive dissonance, we found evidence that it may have been misused in marketing practices. This is due to a lack of interest for the way inconsistent consumers are perceived. Our findings suggest that a consumer that changes her attitude in favor of a product will be seen as lacking competence. This is especially true if the inconsistent consumer is an in-group member. Our study implies that marketers should use a spokesperson that is seen as an in-group member and that is behaving in a consistent manner.

Keywords: Impression, Consistent and dissonant consumer, Warmth and Competence

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DIFFERENT APPROACH TO THE THEORY OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE: PERCEPTION OF A DISSONANT CONSUMER DEPENDING ON HER GROUP BELONGING *

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Although marketers have long been interested in the theory of cognitive dissonance, we found evidence that it may have been misused in marketing practices. This is due to a lack of interest for the way inconsistent consumers are perceived. Our findings suggest that a consumer that changes her attitude in favor of a product will be seen as lacking competence. This is especially true if the inconsistent consumer is an in-group member. Our study implies that marketers should use a spokesperson that is seen as an in-group member and that is behaving in a consistent manner.

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1. Introduction and research question

Most marketing communications are aimed at changing consumers’ attitudes and behaviors towards a particular product or service (i.e. choose the company’s product/service over the competitors). In mass media, advertisements often stage such attitude change on the part of consumers. The tacit assumption behind these messages is that seeing a consumer changes his/her mind in favor of buying the company’s product/service will convince observers to follow their example and also change their own attitude in favor of the advertised product/service. But is this necessarily true? In other words, how is a consumer with inconsistent attitudes perceived by observers?

2. Theoretical framework and hypothesis

When it comes to changing ones opinion, numerous studies (Festinger, 1957; Elliot & Devine, 1994; Martinie, 2013) show that inconsistency is frowned upon. Festinger (1957) was the first to argue that inconsistency between two cognitions will provoke a psychological discomfort. He labelled this effect “cognitive dissonance”. Further research on the norm of consistency (Gawronsky, 2012) has shown that not only does cognitive dissonance provoke discomfort in the person experiencing it (Elliot & Devine, 1994) but also that the changes of attitude that it causes lead observers to have a negative perception of people experiencing cognitive dissonance (Davis & Jones, 1960; Glass, 1964; Barden, Rucker, & Petty, 2005). Researchers identified key conditions for activation of cognitive dissonance: First of all there has to be an internal attribution in a free-choice context. In a typical cognitive dissonance experiment (Fontiat, Caillaud & Martinie, 2004; Joule & Martinie, 2008; Martinie, 2003) participants are asked to execute a counter-attitudinal behavior. This request is done while maintaining the subject’s freedom to accept or reject the counter-attitudinal behavior. When accepting to act this way, a person will experience psychological discomfort (Elliot & Devine, 1994). In order to reduce this discomfort, he or she is likely to change his or her attitude (Martinie, 2003). Although it is not the only way to reduce dissonance, it is the most preferred, both by participants (Martinie, 2003) and researchers (see Martinie, 2013). Relying on these findings, academics in marketing started investigating how to induce cognitive dissonance in order to influence consumers’ choices (Holloway, 1967). They also wanted to consider the types of marketing communication that they should engage in, in order to reduce the post decisional dissonance for the consumers that buy high priced goods such as refrigerators (Hunt, 1970). Hunt (1970) found that consumers who after the purchase received a personal reassuring letter from the store had lower dissonance scores compared to the group that did not receive any post-purchase information. Interestingly, those consumers that received a telephone call from the store increased the post-purchase anxiety and dissonance (Hunt, 1970). Researchers were also interested in strategies that consumers use in order to reduce post-purchase dissonance (Connole Benson and Khera, 1977). Connole et al. (1977) found that ‘innovators’ (consumers that bought a car that is new on the market) sought more consonant, reassuring information about the chosen car, compared to consumers that bought an already known car model. As illustrated, the applications and the implications of the theory of cognitive dissonance for the marketers are various. Nevertheless, interest for this subject is sporadic since researchers have had difficulties in generalizing findings obtained in laboratory context to more ecological milieu (Cohen & Goldberg, 1970). Moreover, to our prior knowledge, inter-individual perspective of dissonance has not been systematically explored at all, and yet it has been widely used in practice. For example, classic
commercials for washing products show a consumer changing an attitude toward one product and reorienting toward another. Although the goal of these kinds of commercials is to show the performativity of the product, marketers and researchers have not systematically explored the impression that other consumers form about the person (a.k.a another regular consumer) who is manifesting an inconsistent behavior while presenting the product. On one hand, the consistency norm is one of the dominant social norms, more precisely there is a preference for consistency over inconsistency in individualistic societies and within the individualistically oriented individuals (Cialdini, Wosinska, Barrett, Butner and Gornik-Durose, 1999; Petrova, Cialdini and Sills, 2007). This norm reflects a person’s preference between his or her own attitudes, behaviors and/or attitude and a behavior (Guadagno & Cialdini, 2010). Persons who have a strong preference for consistency and consider it as a valued norm will behave in a more predictive manner (Guadagno & Cialdini, 2010). Moreover, when given opportunity they will manifest consistency in order to give such an impression (Guadagno & Cialdini, 2010). On the other hand, impressions are one of the determinants of behaviors. More specifically, more positive impressions lead to approaching behaviors, and less positive tend to provoke avoiding behaviors (Slepian, Young, Rule, Weisbuch, and Ambady, 2012). It is thus important to know what kind of impression observers have of a person that is manifesting an inconsistent behavior. Our goal in the present research effort is to investigate whether the perception of a consumer changing his/her preferences due to cognitive dissonance will fall prey to the consistency norm. Does changing the opinion of one consumer have the negative side-effect of making that consumer seem less reliable?

Impression formation is an instantaneous process (Willis & Todorov, 2006) and dynamic (Wojciske, 1994) in the sense that many factors influence and change the way we judge and perceive others. One important factor is group belonging. Numerous investigations showed that perception process and impression are affected by a group belonging of a perceived person (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy and Flament, 1971). More precisely, numerous studies showed that someone who is perceived as an in-group is evaluated more favorably than someone who is perceived as an out-group (Lonsdale & North, 2009). This phenomenon is known as the intragroup favoritism. Studies showed that someone who is perceived as an in-group receives more resources (i.e. in a resource allocation task, (e.g. Tajtel et al.,1971; Mullen, Brown and Smith, 1992) and is judged more positively compared to someone who is perceived as an out-group. More interestingly, Castelli, Tomelleri and Zogmaister (2008) showed that although on the explicit level participants expressed the preference for the person who manifested egalitarian attitudes, on the implicit level, they associated more positive words when evaluating the person manifesting the preference toward the member of his group (aka intragroup favoritism). As findings from social psychology suggest, we hypothesized that when it comes to an in-group consumer who is manifesting an inconsistent behavior (thus transgresses the norm), judgments would be more severe compared to the condition when she is being consistent. Put in terms of group belonging, we expected to observe intragroup favoritism when it comes to Consistent In-group Consumer.

Research on social perception has shown that Warmth and Competence are two fundamental dimensions that cover social perception of groups (Fiske, Cuddy and Glick, 2007), individuals (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt and Kashima, 2005) and even commercial brands (Kervyn, Malone, & Fiske, 2012; Fiske, Malone, & Kervyn, 2012; Kervyn, Chan, Malone Koruskik, & Ybarra, 2014). Therefore we expected to observe higher scores on both dimensions for the in-group consumer i.e. intragroup favoritism, and a consistency effect.
3. Method

The study used a factorial 2 (Group belonging: In-group vs Out-group) by 2 (Type of behavior: Inconsistent vs Consistent) design. Hundred and twenty one female participants (from University of Poitiers, French native speakers, aged M= 20.3) took part in the study.

First they were randomly assigned to watch one of four video clips starring either an in-group consumer (French girl) or an out-group consumer (Serbian girl). The video showed the consumer taking part in a marketing survey about youth’s preferences for chocolate bars. The duration of a video clip was around three minutes.

Since we used nationality as a differentiation cue for the in-group/out-group manipulation, just after the consumer presented herself, the video was paused and participants were invited to evaluate on a 0-to-10 scale to what degree they felt culturally close toward the consumer in the video. Afterwards, in the video, the consumer was asked to evaluate her preference for six different chocolate bars on a scale from ‘I hate’ to ‘I adore’.

Then, for the cognitive dissonance part of the video, the consumer was asked to find five positive characteristics for a chocolate bar. In the consistent condition, she was asked for the chocolate bar she adored. For the inconsistent condition she was asked to do the same, but for the chocolate bar she hated. In both cases she freely accepted to complete the task. Finally, in the dissonance resolution part of the video the consumer was given the opportunity to reevaluate her attitude toward the chocolate bar. In the inconsistent condition she did so by changing the way she rated the “hated” chocolate bar by moving it to the “somewhat like” category.

After watching the entire clip, participants were asked to evaluate on the scale from 0 to 10 to what degree each of 16 adjectives referring to warmth and competence describe the consumer.

4. Results

Our manipulation check confirmed that the in-group/out-group manipulation was successful since participants felt culturally closer to the in-group consumer (M = 6.87, SD = 1.60) compared to the outgroup consumer (M = 2.58, SD = 1.85), t (119) = 13.7, p < .00.

Further analysis of covariance showed that, on the Warmth dimension, there was a significant interaction between Group belonging and Type of behavior F(1,115) = 4.39, p = .03. More precisely, as expected, Tukey’s test revealed that In-group Consistent Consumer was seen as the warmest compared to all other consumers. Nevertheless, In-group Inconsistent Consumer was seen as warmer compared to Out-group Consistent Consumer (p <.05).

For the Competence dimension, an analysis of covariance revealed a main effect of Type of behavior F(1,115) = 17.11, p < .00, showing that Consistent behavior is seen as more competent (M = 7.1, SD = 0.1) compared to Inconsistent behavior (M = 5.9, SD = 0.19) regardless of Consumer’s group belonging. There was however no significant effect of group belonging for the competence dimension. Means and standard deviations are presented in the Table 1 while Figure 1 illustrates positions on two dimensions for each Consumer regarding obtained evaluations.
5. Discussion

According to our hypothesis, participants expressed the ingroup favoritism while judging the ingroup consistent consumer, especially when evaluating her warmth. Since the Warmth dimension
Herak, Kervyn, Kamiejski, Martinie reflects someone’s intentions and trustworthiness (Fiske et al., 2007), these results suggest that using a spokesperson that is seen as an in-group will be more beneficial and effective for product promotion. On the other hand, this study showed that the consistent behavior is always seen as more competent. The previously used strategy with a consumer that is changing attitudes in favor of the product is thus not quite appropriate. Rather than making the spokesperson change her or his attitude, our findings suggest that she or he should express the same (positive) attitude from the very beginning. Our findings imply that this kind of strategy could actually backfire and maybe even diminish the positive evaluation of a product. It would be interesting to see if the chosen product would become less desirable after being evaluated positively by a non-competent consumer.

In order to generalize these results, studies should be conducted on more representative samples, and with different range of products. Also next steps could include the approach-avoidance behaviors toward the observed consumer and likewise toward the promoted product. Although some researchers (Cohen & Goldberg, 1970) found that the theory of cognitive dissonance was controversial and not worth pursuing, we consider it as a lucrative domain with different implications and use in marketing, especially in word of mouth communication. Since consumers engage more and more in information change especially online (Andreassen & Streukens, 2009), it is useful to know what kind of consumers are going to be most influential, and which ones could (unintentionally) detriment a product or company image.

References