

Source Expertise and Self-Focused Attention Effects on
Biased Scanning of Advertisements

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In the process of forming or changing an attitude toward a stimulus, the consumer is likely to be influenced by information about others' evaluations of that same stimulus. For example, simply knowing that a particular brand of a product has received a highly favorable or unfavorable rating from Consumer Reports may affect one's own attitude toward that brand--perhaps in an inordinate manner. More specifically, prior information about others' evaluations may lead to what is known as biased scanning.

Biased scanning occurs when an individual generates cognitive responses (thoughts) predominately favoring only one side of an issue (Janis & Mann, 1968; Lammers, in press; O'Neill & Levings, 1979). These cognitive responses are said to mediate attitude formation and change. That is, if one generates thoughts largely favorable to an advocated position (support arguments or proarguments), acceptance of that position is more likely than if one generates counterarguments. Thus, according to the cognitive response approach, variables which affect the nature and quantity of cognitive response generation ultimately affect attitude (Petty, Ostrom, & Brock, in press; Wright, 1980).

Deliberate attempts by others to induce biased scanning in a particular direction may be rather subtle (as in the Consumer Reports example just given), or considerably more blatant (as in "hard-sell" advertisements). The present study focused only on more subtle attempts

and on two variables which theoretically should affect the success of a source's attempts to induce biased scanning in an advocated direction: the source's expertise and the subject's level of self-focused attention.

Although there are compelling exceptions (Sternthal, Dholakia, & Leavitt, 1978), numerous studies have found that statements delivered by expert sources tend to be more persuasive than those delivered by nonexperts (cf. Maddux & Rogers, 1980). Unfortunately, since only a few of these studies directly measured cognitive response output (see Wright, 1980), the extent to which source expertise actually induced biased scanning is more suspect. Nevertheless, in line with most of the persuasion research, it was hypothesized that source expertise would enhance biased scanning in the direction advocated by the source (Congruent Biased Scanning) and would inhibit the generation of cognitive responses inconsistent with the advocated direction (Discrepant Biased Scanning).

The second variable, self-focused attention, refers to the direction of one's attention to one's self as opposed to the direction of attention to the external environment. Self-focused attention is currently the cornerstone of self-awareness theory (Wicklund, 1975) and is a powerful formulation purported to explain a diverse set of social psychological phenomena. Briefly stated, self-awareness theory contends that self-focused attention can increase the salience of behavior and standards. More relevant to the present study is the notion that self-focused attention can increase the salience of affect, mood, and dominant cognitive response set. For example, Fenigstein (1979) has argued that self-focused attention during an unpleasant interaction increases one's negative

responses, whereas self-focused attention during a pleasant interaction increases one's positive responses. Scheier and Carver (1977) found that self-focused attention increased the pleasantness of positive stimuli (slides of nude females) and the unpleasantness of negative stimuli (slides of human atrocities). They also found that self-focused attention increased sensitivity to mood, such that positive moods were more positive and negative moods were more negative under high levels of self-focused attention. Finally, Lammers (1979) found that self-focused attention increased subjects' output of dominant cognitive responses to advertising stimuli.

To the extent that self-focused attention enhances the salience of one's affect, mood, and dominant cognitive response set, it was predicted that increased self-focused attention would enhance the hypothesized effects of source expertise on both congruent and discrepant biased scanning.

Method

Subjects and Design

Subjects were 124 California State University, Northridge Business School undergraduates (63% males) who volunteered to participate in a study on attitudes toward advertisements. Subjects were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions and were run in groups of 15 to 30.

The experiment was a $2 \times 2 + 1$ between-subjects design with source expertise (low vs. high) and self-focused attention (low vs. high) as the completely crossed factors. The appended cell was a control group which was given no information about the source's expertise and experienced low self-focused attention.

Procedure

Biased scanning induction and source expertise manipulation. The subjects were shown nine slides of magazine advertisements. The order of slide presentation was randomly determined prior to running the experiment and remained fixed throughout the course of the experiment. The advertisements had been randomly drawn from a set of over 55 advertisements arbitrarily selected from popular magazines (e.g., Newsweek, Los Angeles Time, and New West). To induce biased scanning processes, three of the advertisements were labeled as having previously received highly favorable ratings, three were labeled as having previously received highly unfavorable ratings, and three "had not been rated." These evaluative labels were randomly assigned prior to running the experiment and remained fixed throughout the experiment. In addition, the subjects were told that the previous ratings and evaluative labels came from either the Advertising Club of Los Angeles (High Expertise), or from "some local high school seniors" (Low Expertise), or from an unidentified source (Control Expertise).

Each advertisement was exposed on the screen for one minute. During this exposure time, the subjects rated the advertisement on a set of twenty 11-point Semantic Differential-type attitude scales. Then the screen went blank for one minute. During this blank minute, the subjects recorded their thoughts, comments, and ideas about the advertisement they had just seen and rated. This thought-listing procedure for collecting cognitive responses was adapted from previous cognitive response research (e.g., Lammers & Becker, 1980).

Self-focused attention manipulation. Cameras and mirrors have been traditional inductors of self-focused attention (Davis & Brock, 1975). The present study used a videotape camera and monitor. While the subjects were being shown the advertisements, they were aware that they either were obviously being videotaped (High Self-Focused Attention) or were not being videotaped (Low Self-Focused Attention). High self-focused attention subjects were told that they were being videotaped because their nonverbal reactions to the slides were important bits of information. For subjects in the low self-focused attention conditions, the videotape camera was pointed at the screen rather than at them. They were told that the slides were being filmed and put on videotape to facilitate future presentations of the advertisements.

Measures of cognitive responses, attitude, and recall. The major cognitive response variables were derived from the thoughts listed by the subjects to each advertisement. Each thought was later rated on 11-point scales by two independent judges according to how favorable a comment it was about the advertisement. The mean of the two judges' ratings was used to determine whether a thought was favorable, unfavorable, or neutral/irrelevant. In addition, those thoughts which had been written about the six advertisements "previously labeled" by the source were classified as either congruent cognitive responses if they were in the same direction as the source's evaluative labels, or as discrepant cognitive responses if they were in opposition to the source's evaluative labels. For example, a favorable comment about an advertisement that had supposedly received high ratings was classified as a congruent cognitive response, as was an unfavorable comment about an advertisement which had received poor ratings from the source. Unfavorable comments about an

advertisement rated highly by a source were classified as discrepant, as were favorable comments about an advertisement given poor ratings by a source. All other comments and thoughts were simply classified as favorable or unfavorable. (On the average, less than one neutral/irrelevant thought was written by each subject across all nine advertisements; thus, neutral/irrelevant thoughts were not subjected to further analyses.)

An overall attitude index score was computed by averaging each subject's ratings on the twenty attitude scales. An advertisement recall score was computed by summing the number of correctly recalled advertised brands. After all nine advertisements had been rated, the manipulation check measures were collected and subjects were debriefed and thanked.

Results

Effectiveness of Source Expertise Manipulation

The effectiveness of the source expertise manipulation was indicated by the finding that the Advertising Club of Los Angeles ($\bar{M} = 7.45$) was rated as being more knowledgeable about the quality of advertisements than were high school seniors ($\bar{M} = 5.84$, $t(122) = 5.28$, $p < .0001$).

Effectiveness of Self-Focused Attention Manipulation

One of the problems that has plagued self-awareness theorists is that of devising an appropriate manipulation check (Vallacher & Solodky, 1979). Merely asking subjects how self-conscious they are induces self-attention. Subjects in the present study were asked to rate on 11-point scales how often the camera was pointed directly at them and how distracted they were by the camera. High self-focused attention subjects ($\bar{M} = 6.00$) felt the camera's presence more often than did low self-focused attention subjects ($\bar{M} = 2.24$, $F(1, 119) = 46.71$, $p < .0001$); and, high self-focused

attention subjects ($\underline{M} = 3.48$) felt more distracted by the camera than did low self-focused attention subjects ($\underline{M} = 2.51$, $\underline{F} (1, 119) = 3.81$, $p \leq .053$). These results, coupled with the knowledge that the camera is a conventionally accepted method of inducing self-awareness (cf. Wicklund, 1975), strongly support the contention that the self-focused attention manipulation was successful.

Biased Scanning

As predicted, source expertise facilitated congruent biased scanning (respectively, control, low, and high source expertise $\underline{M}s = 3.19, 2.88, 3.90$; $\underline{F} (2, 119) = 5.54$, $p \leq .005$). Also predicted was the finding that source expertise would inhibit discrepant biased scanning (respectively, control, low, and high source expertise $\underline{M}s = 2.73, 1.80, 1.50$; $\underline{F} (2, 119) = 10.017$, $p \leq .0001$). No effects were found on the cognitive responses to the advertisements which had no prior evaluative labels attached. Thus, the effects of source expertise were specific to those conditions in which biased scanning attempts had actually been made.¹

Self-focused attention, either alone or in interaction with source expertise, failed to have a significant effect on cognitive responses.

Attitude

As would be expected from the cognitive response findings, source expertise led to significantly decreased ratings of advertisements which had been labeled by the source as poor advertisements (respectively, control, low, and high source expertise $\underline{M}s = 6.88, 5.95, 5.77$; $\underline{F} (2, 119) = 6.28$, $p \leq .003$). However, no other effects on attitude scores were significant.

Advertisement Recall

Low source expertise significantly reduced advertisement recall

(respectively, control, low, and high source expertise $M_s = 7.60, 6.06, 7.56$; $F(2, 119) = 4.93, p < .009$). A possible explanation for this is that subjects who were in the low expertise conditions spent more time derogating the source (cf. Wright, 1980) than on a complete processing of the advertisements. This speculation is supported, in part, by the previously reported finding that discrepant biased scanning was negatively related to the expertise level of the source.

Discussion

The results of the present study strongly supported the hypotheses concerning the effects of source expertise on biased scanning. Prior evaluations attributed to expert sources produced an increase in congruent biased scanning, whereas prior evaluations attributed to sources lower in expertise produced an increase in discrepant biased scanning.

Although source expertise produced significant changes in congruent and discrepant cognitive responses, these cognitive response changes were accompanied by a limited amount of attitude change. In specific, negative ratings (prior evaluative labels) were more persuasive when delivered by an expert source than by a nonexpert. However, positive comments delivered by an expert were neither more nor less persuasive than those delivered by a source low in expertise. Perhaps negative cognitive responses carry considerably more weight in the persuasion process (Wright, 1973). The failure to find complete correspondence between cognitive response shifts and attitude shifts is disconcerting, yet it is not particularly damaging to the conclusions of the present study. Furthermore, this lack of correspondence hardly represents an exceptional case in the cognitive response literature (Lammers & Becker, 1980; Wright, 1974).

Self-focused attention had no apparent effect on biased scanning, attitude, or advertisement recall. Nonsignificant results sometimes can be attributed to ineffective manipulations. While such may be the case here, it seems unlikely that the manipulation of self-focused attention was ineffective, for both the conventionality of the method and the manipulations checks suggest otherwise.

A second possibility is that self-focused attention has no effect on cognitive responses and attitude change. Although this is even less likely given the voluminous research on objective self-awareness (McDonald, 1980), it is interesting to note that in the only study known to the present author to have investigated the self-focused attention effects on cognitive responses to advertisements (Lammers, 1979), self-focused attention interacted with another variable, but was not strong enough in and of itself to produce a main effect. Perhaps advertisements tend to be less involving than the issues typically raised in persuasion studies reported in the empirical literature (e.g., "this university must double your tuition fees). If so, this study indirectly supports Petty and Cacioppo's (1979) hypothesis that low involvement with an issue inhibits message processing. At any rate, the effects of self-focused attention on cognitive responses remains a theoretically interesting area of promising research that is still in the introductory stage of its life cycle where challenging questions prevail.

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Footnotes

¹For those readers who are interested in the separate analyses of each type of cognitive response, the univariate credibility main effect F_s (2, 119) were 4.83 ($p < .0096$) for favorable comments about positively labeled advertisements; 2.83 ($p < .097$) for unfavorable comments about positively labeled advertisements; 9.88 ($p < .0001$) for favorable comments about negatively labeled advertisements; 3.95 ($p < .022$) for unfavorable comments about negatively labeled advertisements; 1.25 ($p < .29$) for favorable comments about unlabeled advertisements; and, 1.79 ($p < .17$) for unfavorable comments about unlabeled advertisements.