

Effects of accuracy motivation and need to evaluate on mode of attitude formation and attitude–behavior consistency[☆]

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Abstract

This study investigates the effects of accuracy motivation and need to evaluate on online vs. memory-based attitude formation and attitude–behavior consistency. Results show that online attitude formation is more likely when accuracy motivation or the need to evaluate is high. However, cognitive load disrupts online attitude formation even when accuracy motivation is high. Additionally, attitude relevance increases the likelihood of online attitude formation, but attitude accessibility does not. Furthermore, online (vs. memory-based) attitudes are more predictive of subsequent non-hypothetical choice.

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The consumer psychology literature exhibits a great deal of confusion about attitude formation processes. Some argue that attitudes are always formed automatically in an online manner whenever consumers are exposed to an attitude object (e.g., Bargh, 2002; Ferguson & Zayas, 2009), whereas others argue that attitudes are never formed automatically but are memory-based constructions created in response to exposure to a request for judgment (Schwarz, 2006). Alternatively, prior research from social psychology on online vs. memory-based processing has focused primarily on person perception and has shown that memory-based processing is more likely for unmotivated or unexpected judgment tasks (Bizer, Tormala, Rucker, & Petty, 2006; Briley, Shrum, & Wyer, 2007; Hastie & Park, 1986; Tormala & Petty, 2001). The present research extends this work by investigating a new determinant of online vs. memory-based processing (accuracy motivation), as well as dispositional need

to evaluate, in product evaluation and in product attitude–behavior consistency (for a discussion of the different processes involved in person perception vs. product perception, see Wyer & Adaval, 2008). The present research also manipulates attitude consolidation (i.e., the process by which consumers recall and process their thoughts, feelings, and knowledge about an object into a functional attitude) to control for the presence or absence of previously formed attitudes and shows that manner of attitude formation, attitude relevance, and attitude accessibility are conceptually and empirically distinct. Finally, prior research on online vs. memory-based processing in person perception has focused on evaluative ratings, whereas the present research focuses on actual behavior. This is an important distinction when investigating brand evaluation.

Online attitudes are formed on the spot, during exposure to stimuli, such as product information, and when needed later, the formed attitude is retrieved from memory. Memory-based attitudes are formed not during exposure to product information, but later during the performance of a judgment task. Memory-based attitudes are based on the pieces of attitude-relevant information that are available or retrieved during the judgment task, making memory-based attitudes more dependent on recalled information. Typically, low recall–judgment correlations are observed for online judgments, and high recall–

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judgment correlations are observed for memory-based judgments (Hastie & Park, 1986; Tormala & Petty, 2001). Further, online attitudes tend to be more readily accessible (demonstrated through faster response latencies), are readily applied in a generalized form to other contexts, and are held with greater certainty. Memory-based attitudes are reported more slowly (longer response latencies) and are only likely to influence immediate behavior, when the situation-induced attitude is salient (Bizer et al., 2006).

Online judgments are likely to be formed when the participant has the goal of forming an impression or summary judgment of a target (Briley et al., 2007; Hastie & Park, 1986; McGraw & Dolan, 2007). Hamilton and Sherman (1996; see also McConnell, Sherman, & Hamilton, 1994) contend that this goal is predicated on the expectation that individuals are “coherent entities,” and thus, we are motivated to form coherent impressions of individuals, but not groups. Outside of person perception, research has shown that as issue relevance increases, the functional utility of forming an attitude also increases (Fazio, 1989, 1995). One way to increase issue relevance is via accuracy motivation (Ahluwalia, 2002; Cronley, Posavac, Meyer, Kardes, & Kellaris, 2005; Maheswaran, Mackie, & Chaiken, 1992; Torrelli, 2006). When consumers expect to share, justify, or explain their judgments to others, they are more likely to process information extensively and should be more likely to form attitudes online.

Online attitudes also require cognitive resources and the ability or opportunity to process information. Time pressure, distraction, high levels of physiological arousal, and multiple task demands have been shown to decrease the likelihood of online attitude formation and attitude certainty (Hastie & Park, 1986; Sanbonmatsu & Kardes, 1988; see also Kardes, Cronley, & Posavac, 2004; Tormala & Petty, 2004; Wegener, Petty, Blankenship, & Detweiler-Bedell, 2010).

Tormala and Petty (2001) showed that the need to evaluate, or “the chronic tendency to engage in evaluative responding” (Jarvis & Petty, 1996, p. 172) also encourages online judgment formation for person perception tasks. Individuals high in the need to evaluate are quick to judge, opinionated, and likely to view their opinions as functional.

Social psychology research on online vs. memory-based processing (e.g., Bizer et al., 2006; Hastie & Park, 1986; Tormala & Petty, 2001) and consumer psychology research on dual-process models of persuasion (e.g., Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran, 2004; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983; Priester & Petty, 2003; Strack, Werth, & Deutsch, 2006; Wegener et al., 2010) have developed independently, and the links between these two streams have not been investigated. The former stream of research suggests that consumers form online attitudes only when it is functional or beneficial for them to do so (i.e., the functionality hypothesis, Fazio, 1989, 1995). Conversely, some dual-process models claim that judgment formation is immediate and automatic “upon the mere presence or occurrence of the object or event” (i.e., automaticity, Bargh, 2002, p. 281; see also Gilbert, 1991; Kahneman, 2003; Stanovich & West, 2000). These two positions provide opposing hypotheses. If online attitude

formation is more likely when viewed as having a functional benefit, then consumers should form online attitudes only when they are motivated and able to process the information fully and deeply. That is, consumers will be more likely to form attitudes online when they are in the condition often attributed to the central/systematic route (vs. the peripheral/heuristic route) by the dual-process model researchers. Conversely, if attitude formation is more likely to be automatic “upon the mere presence” of a stimulus, then online attitude formation should be equally likely in either of the routes to persuasion discussed in the dual-process models. Previous research has not examined online vs. memory-based judgments within a persuasion context looking at motivation and cognitive load, and this research provides a test of the relative effect of functionality vs. ease of processing. Our predictions are consistent with the functionality hypothesis, and we expect functionality rather than ease to be a more important determinant of the manner of attitude formation.

Experiments 1a and 1b investigate the relative influence of functionality and ease of processing. Specifically, we investigate the effects of accuracy motivation and need to evaluate (functionality of forming an attitude), plus cognitive load (ease of processing) on the route to persuasion and on the manner of attitude formation (online vs. memory-based). As mentioned above, we predict that functionality will be more important than ease of processing such that when accuracy motivation is high, the need to evaluate is high, and cognitive load is low, consumers should be more likely to follow the central/systematic route to persuasion and should be more likely to form online attitudes. Conversely, when both motivation and need to evaluate are low, or cognitive load is high, consumers should be more likely to follow the peripheral/heuristic route to persuasion and should be more likely to form memory-based attitudes. Experiment 2 shows that the manner of attitude formation (online vs. memory-based), attitude relevance, and attitude accessibility are conceptually and empirically distinct. Experiment 3 shows that attitude–behavior consistency is greater when attitudes are more likely to be formed online, rather than memory-based.

Experiments 1a and 1b

Experiment 1a examined the role of accuracy motivation and need to evaluate and Experiment 1b examined the role of cognitive load and need to evaluate on online vs. memory-based attitude formation. Experiment 1a focused on print ads and Experiment 1b focused on Internet ads.

Method

Numerous studies have used response latency to measure online and memory-based judgments (e.g., Bizer et al., 2006). Because online attitudes are formed during encoding, reporting of previously formed judgments is relatively quick. Memory-based judgments take longer to report because the individual must recall, evaluate, and integrate relevant pieces of information. To test for online vs. memory-based attitude

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