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The Effects of Omitting-Then-Revealing Product Attribute Information: an Information Revelation Effect

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Three experiments investigate the evaluative effect of revealing previously omitted information. In short, attributes were weighed more heavily when omitted-then-revealed (versus not omitted). Additionally, this revelation effect was mediated by changes in affect toward the product and bounded to those open (versus resistant) to change. The implications are discussed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When evaluating products, consumers frequently rely on presented information and neglect vital missing or unknown information; thus, increasing the likelihood of forming biased and resistant judgments (Sanbonmatsu et al., 1991). The present research investigates the effectiveness of a supposed debiasing technique designed to increase sensitivity to omissions. Specifically, we test the hypothesis that revealing previously omitted information: (1) increases sensitivity to the missing information, and (2) leads to overweighing and thus overcorrection.

This hypothesis is based on research demonstrating that consumers place greater weight on highly salient information (Gardner, 1983). Revealing a previously omitted attribute should increase its salience. According to Veitch and Griffitt (1976), when individuals process novel information that is positively (negatively) valenced they experience positive (negative) affect, subsequently affecting judgment. That is, the more individuals weigh a positive (negative) attribute, the more positivity (negativity) they should feel about the product.

Research shows that consumers vary in their willingness to consider new information (Oreg, 2003), and those unwilling to re-evaluate the product (i.e., those highly resistant to change) should not even attempt to correct for the revealed information.

Study 1

Study 1 served to demonstrate the information revelation effect. We hypothesized that omitting positive attribute information at initial evaluation and then revealing the information would increase purchase intentions, whereas revealing previously omitted, negative attribute information would decrease purchase intentions (H1).

Participants ($N = 220$) were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (Information Presentation: Omit-then-reveal or Never Omit) \times 2 (Information Valence: Positive or Negative) between-subjects design.

Participants formed two separate evaluations of the same product (a vacation package). Across conditions, the description of the vacation featured the same information about six product attributes. Three additional attributes were also presented, though the valence of this information was intentionally varied and pretested. After viewing the product, participants indicated their anticipated satisfaction with the product on 7-point scales anchored from 1 (very unhappy/unsatisfied) to 7 (very happy/satisfied) ($\alpha = .93$).

In the never omit condition, the omitted information was presented alongside the other six attributes. Whereas, in the omit-then-reveal condition, the information was revealed after participants had completed their initial evaluation of the vacation. Following the initial evaluation, participants indicated how much their purchase intentions had changed on three 11-point scales anchored at *much worse—much better*, *more unfavorable—more favorable*, and *less positive—more positive* ($\alpha = .98$).

All analyses were submitted to the same two-way ANOVAs. An ANOVA of initial evaluations revealed no significant main or interactive effects (all $ps > .4$), thus initial evaluations did not vary according to condition. By contrast, an ANOVA on perceived change in purchase intentions revealed a main effect of information valence

($F(1, 219) = 57.33, p < .001$), and the expected two-way interaction effect ($F(1, 219) = 42.55, p < .001$). In support of H1, in the positive valence condition, participants demonstrated a significant increase in purchase intentions when the calorie information was omitted-then-revealed relative to when it was never omitted ($t(112) = 4.89, p < .001$). In the negative valence condition, participants demonstrated a significant decrease in purchase intentions when the calorie information was omitted-then-revealed relative to when it was never omitted ($t(104) = -4.35, p < .001$).

Study 2

Study 2 sought to offer insight into the process underlying this information revelation effect. Specifically, we proposed that consumers would perceive revealed information as more diagnostic, and diagnosticity will drive the evaluative differences observed in Study 1 (H2). The same Study 1 design, procedure, and measures were used. The only difference is that participants indicated the perceived value of the omitted information on 9-point scales anchored at *not at all helpful—very helpful*, *not at all useful—very useful*, *not at all valuable—very valuable*, and *not at all beneficial—very beneficial* ($\alpha = .98$).

In support of H1, the results of an ANOVA on change in purchase intentions replicated the effects observed in Study 1. To determine whether this effect is mediated by affect, a mediated moderation analysis was conducted (Hayes 2012). As hypothesized (H2), the perceived diagnosticity of the omitted attribute explained why participants provided higher intentions to purchase the product when a negatively valenced attribute was omitted-then-revealed (95% CI: $-.38, -.03$), and when a positively valenced attribute was omitted-then-revealed (95% CI: $.15, .62$).

Study 3

Study 3 sought to explore whether the information revelation effect is bounded to those open (versus closed) to re-evaluate their decision (H3). This study implemented the same procedure, design, and stimuli as described in Study 1. The only differences are that a different product was used, and dispositional resistance to change was assessed using the individual difference measure developed by Oreg (2003).

The results of a linear regression showed a significant main effect of information presentation ($\beta = -.55, t = -3.5, p = .001$), along with the predicted two-way interaction between information revelation and information valence ($\beta = .8, t = 3.59, p < .001$). Most importantly, however, the analysis revealed a significant three-way interaction between the factors ($\beta = -.49, t = -2.2, p = .03$).

A spotlight analysis revealed that when resistance to change was low, the results replicated the findings reported in Studies 1 and 2, as there was a significant interaction between information presentation and information valence ($\beta = 1.28, t = 4.06, p < .001$). By contrast, when resistance to change was high, there was no longer a significant interaction between information presentation and information valence ($\beta = .31, t = .98, p = .33$).

Discussion

Considered together, the results of three experiments provide strong evidence for the information revelation effect, and identify information diagnosticity as the mechanism and resistance to change as an important boundary condition. These findings are important because prior research shows that consumers are frequently insensitive to omissions and are often unable to fully appreciate the implications of missing information even when it is detected (Sanbonmatsu et al. 1991). For example, the overlooked information used in this investigation included important nutritional details for a breakfast cereal and the fees associated with a vacation package. In a broader sense, given the alarming rates of obesity and financial debt around the world and their negative consequences, techniques that can enhance the attention and weight given to such information in subsequent decision-making have strong implications for consumers and policy-makers.

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