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Influences on the Illusory Truth Effect in Consumer Judgment

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The Illusory Truth Effect: Exploring Implicit and Explicit Memory Influences on Consumer Judgments Maria L. Cronley Miami University Frank R. Kardes University of Cincinnati Scott A. Hawkins University of Toronto Repetition does not seem like a sound basis for determining truth, but researchers have consistently found that people rate repeated statements as more true than non-repeated statements. This effect is known as the illusory truth effect and appears to be quite persistent. Following on previous work in memory and judgment, additional moderators of attention, exclusion, and subliminal exposure are investigated in two experiments to assess their effects on repetition-induced beliefs of validity for product claims. Results provide new insights into the processes of incidental learning and implicit memory use by which consumers form judgments based on repetitive persuasive messages.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers are continually inundated with marketing information. Much of this information is processed at low involvement levels, with incidental-type learning. There is also emerging evidence that unconscious processing exerts influences on motivations, judgments, and behaviors (e.g., Cooper and Cooper 2002; Dijksterhuis 2004; Strahan, Spencer, and Zanna, 2002).

The goal of this research was to further our understanding of how consumers form judgments, both explicitly and implicitly, regarding the truth of marketing claims, given the illusory truth effect. The illusory truth effect is a repetition-based memory effect, where people consistently rate repeated statements as more true than non-repeated statements, primarily because of perceived familiarity of the statements (Hawkins and Hoch 1992). Two experiments examined the influence of repeated marketing claims, the combined influences of processing capacity and exclusion instructions (i.e., telling people that a statement being judged is actually false) as potential moderators (experiment 1), and unconscious influences on judged validity (experiment 2), which to our knowledge has not been examined previously. It was hypothesized that when repetition of claims increased from 0 to 1 to 3 exposures (experiment 1), and from 0 to 4 subliminal exposures (experiment 2), the judged truth of the statements would significantly increase.

Beyond the focal hypothesis, for experiment 1, it was hypothesized that divided attention (vs. full attention) would result in higher ratings of judged truth of claims as repetition increased. It was also hypothesized that an exclusion instruction would result in higher truth ratings of product claims as repetition of the claims decreased.

A 3 (product claim repetition of 0, vs. 1 vs. 3 exposures) X 2 (divided attention vs. full attention) X 2 (exclusion instruction vs. no exclusion instruction) mixed design was employed. The study was administered via computer and truth ratings and response latencies were collected. Analysis of variance of mean truth ratings showed significant main effects and a repetition x exclusion interaction, indicating that the illusory truth effect extends to a marketing message environment and that the exclusion instructions moderated the effect, resulting in higher truth ratings as repetition of claims decreased from 3 to 1 to 0. Analysis of variance of response latencies revealed main effects, 2-way, and 3-way interactions for all three variables of interest. Although there were no specific hypothesized effects for response times, results were surprising. As the ability to judge validity was made easier because of familiarity due to repetition or exclusion instructions, response times became faster which logically supports the truth effect explanation. But under distraction, response times also became faster. One explanation may be that subjects became more involved, or simply concentrated on the distraction task to the exclusion of the truth task, resulting in faster response times and attenuating repetition effects.

Experiment 2 examined potential repetition effects of product claims, resulting from unconscious processing of stimuli. It was hypothesized that subliminal (vs. supraliminal) exposure to product information would result in an enhancement of the illusory truth effect. A 2 (product claim repetition of 0 vs. 4) X 2 (subliminal vs. supraliminal exposure) mixed design was used. The subliminal manipulation was administered via a lexical decision task, adapted from Strahan et al. (2002).

Analysis of mean truth ratings as a function of repetition and exposure showed main effects and a significant repetition x exposure interaction. Under supraliminal conditions, mean truth ratings were significantly higher for 4 (vs. 0) repetitions, as expected, which replicated the results from experiment 1. Surprisingly, a reverse effect emerged in subliminal conditions, with mean truth ratings significantly lower for 4 (vs. 0) repetitions. The unexpected results found in the subliminal conditions suggest that other mechanisms may be at work when information is processed implicitly. We suggest that a form of "implicit correction" may be occurring, whereby the unconscious is able to recognize that familiarity via repetition does not equal truth.

The results of both experiments show that the robustness of the illusory truth effect replicates to an explicit marketing message environment and that as repetition increases, the judged validity of product claims increases. Further, it appears that providing exclusion information moderates the effect. While results of the subliminal conditions ran contrary to predictions, we propose that there is some support for the notion that the unconscious mind operates differently from the conscious mind, and what may be occurring is a type of "implicit correction." Extant research surrounding unconscious processing suggests that the unconscious mind is extremely adept at taking care of a person (e.g., Dijksterhuis 2004; Fernandez-Duque and Thornton 2002; Strahan et al. 2002), painting a picture of a highly efficient and powerful unconscious, and our findings support this conclusion. Of course, we recognize that an implicit correction explanation is speculation, and that alternate possibilities exist. Additional work is needed before any conclusions can be drawn.

In general, this research has important practical implications for marketers who use the commonly employed techniques of repetition of product claims to build brand recognition. Further, the results of experiment 2 may have important implications for the practical and ethical use of subliminal marketing messages and for messages where the goal is "incidental" or mere exposure.

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