



ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

The Curse of Similarity: When and How Similarity Induces Persuasion Reactance

Suntong QI, The Chinese university of Hong Kong

Xianchi Dai, The Chinese university of Hong Kong

Man Ching Canice Kwan, The Open University of Hong Kong

Robert S. Wyer, University of Cincinnati

Salesperson-customer similarity can positively or negatively affect persuasiveness. Consumers more likely to take a recommendation from a dissimilar (vs. similar) salesperson when purchasing a familiar product, but the reverse is true when purchasing an unfamiliar product. Four experiments and secondary data confirm these opposing effects.

[to cite]:

Suntong QI, Xianchi Dai, Man Ching Canice Kwan, and Robert S. Wyer (2021) , "The Curse of Similarity: When and How Similarity Induces Persuasion Reactance", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 49, eds. Tonya Williams Bradford, Anat Keinan, and Matthew Thomson, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 273-274.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/3000387/volumes/v49/NA-49>

[copyright notice]:

This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at <http://www.copyright.com/>.

The Curse of Similarity: When and How Similarity Induces Persuasion Reactance

Suntong QI, The Chinese university of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Xianchi Dai, The Chinese university of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Man Ching Canice Kwan, The Open University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Robert S. Wyer, University of Cincinnati, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

It was suggested that a consumer has two possible roles in the face of a salesperson: a goal seeker and a persuasion sentry (Kirmani and Campbell 2004). As goal seekers, consumers utilize the salesperson and seek information to help them make a better purchase decision. As persuasion sentries, they resist and respond strategically to unwanted persuasion attempts. Thus, focusing on the consumer side, the effectiveness of a salesperson's persuasive effort is jointly determined by a salesperson's perceived helpfulness and sales intention. In this project, we study how consumers' product familiarity and salesperson-consumer similarity change the relative salience of the two forces. We propose that when consumers make a purchase in an unfamiliar product domain, the same persuasive effort from sellers of high (vs. low) similarity would be more effective; alternatively, when consumers make a purchase in a familiar product domain, the reverse is true.

To gather information or to detect persuasion could vary upon consumers' product familiarity. Consumers who are familiar with the product domain already have enough product knowledge or even possess an established preference, while consumers who are unfamiliar with the product domain are not yet able to identify their preferred attribute combination (Mogilner, Rudnick, and Iyengar 2008). These two groups of consumers are likely to have different goals when interacting with the salesperson. The former group is more directed and relies less on external information when making a decision. Therefore, they focus less on the salesperson's helpfulness, but more likely to recognize salespersons' sales intention when receiving a recommendation from a salesperson. In contrast, the latter group faces the task of forming a preference as they have limited knowledge about the products to distinguish different options. They rely more on external information to learn about the products and determine their preference (Hilton and Darley 1991). For this reason, though they may be aware that the salesperson is trying to sell, their primary goal is to evaluate the salesperson's helpfulness when receiving a recommendation.

No matter a consumer is evaluating the helpfulness or sales intention of a salesperson, they are making inferences about the salesperson. Interpersonal similarity thus plays a role. Similarity leads to an easier simulation of mental states, and people are more strongly engage in simulation for similar other (Faraji-Rad, Samuelsen and Warlop 2015; Woo and Mitchell 2000). Based on the assumption that consumers more easily simulate the mental states of similar rather than dissimilar persons, we propose that salesperson-consumer similarity increases consumers' confirmation of inferred helpfulness and sales intention of a salesperson. Thus, when making purchase decisions in unfamiliar product domains, where consumers' primary goal is to form their preference by seeking useful information, consumers are more confirm a similar (vs. dissimilar) salesperson is helpful, and thus similarity increases persuasiveness. Alternatively, when making purchase decisions in familiar product domains, as consumers have already formed their preferences, they focus more on the sellers' sales motives. Therefore, they are more confirm a similar (vs. dissimilar) salesperson's sales intention, and thus similarity decreases persuasiveness.

We first tested two assumptions. Pilot study 1 ($N = 371$) showed that consumers' familiarity with the product influenced their inference of the salesperson's helpfulness and sales intention. Pilot study 2 (the US, $N = 149$; Asia, $N = 57$) showed that people are more confirm about their inference on a salesperson who is similar than dissimilar to them.

Study 1a ($N = 284$) and study 1b ($N = 181$) tested the hypothesis that consumers who are unfamiliar (familiar) with the product domain are more (less) likely to accept a recommendation from a similar salesperson than from a dissimilar one. Results showed that participants with high product familiarity are more likely to take a recommendation from a salesperson with a different ethnicity (study 1a) and gender (study 1b) compared with a salesperson with the same ethnicity (study 1a) and gender (study 1b). For participants who are unfamiliar with the product domain, a similar salesperson has a higher persuasiveness.

In study 2 ($N = 326$), we tested the mechanism that consumers' inference certainty mediates the interaction effect of product familiarity and similarity (with the seller) on persuasiveness. We manipulated salesperson similarity and product familiarity (through familiar versus unfamiliar products) and measured inference certainty about information usefulness and sales intention. We found that inference certainty of information usefulness mediated the effect for unfamiliar products, and inference certainty of sales intention mediated the effect for familiar products.

In study 3 ($N = 473$), we examined a boundary condition to further test the underlying mechanism. To test the advantage of dissimilarity when consumers focus on sales intention, we added a third factor to manipulate the salience of sales intention. We found that the previously proposed effect replicated when participants were paying for the product but attenuated when they got the product for free (low sales intention).

In study 4 ($N = 421$), we tested the proposed effect in real purchase behavior. We gave participants a chance to buy products with four options, and a "salesperson" recommended one of the options. We replicated the interaction effect of product familiarity and ethnic similarity on participants' likelihood to purchase the recommended option.

Secondary data ($N = 10554$) from an insurance company lent further support to our proposition. An analysis of telesales data showed that renewals (customers who are familiar with the product category) were more likely to renew an insurance contract from a salesperson (through phone calls) of the opposite sex than same-sex, but the reverse pattern was found for new customers (i.e. customers who are unfamiliar with the product category).

REFERENCES

- Faraji-Rad, Ali, Bendik M. Samuelsen, and Luk Warlop (2015), "On the persuasiveness of similar others: The role of mentalizing and the feeling of certainty," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 42 (3), 458–71.
- Hilton, James L. and John M. Darley (1991), "The Effects of Interaction Goals on Person Perception," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 24, ed. Mark P. Zanna, New York: Academic Press, 236–67.

Kirmani, Amna and Margaret C. Campbell (2004), "Goal Seeker and Persuasion Sentry: How Consumer Targets Respond to Interpersonal Marketing Persuasion," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31 (3), 573–82.

Mogilner, Cassie, Tamar Rudnick, and Sheena Iyengar (2008), "The Mere Categorization Effect: How the Presence of Categories Increases Choosers' Perceptions of Assortment Variety and Outcome Satisfaction," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 35 (2), 202–15.

Woo, Brandon M. and Jason P. Mitchell (2020), "Simulation: A strategy for mindreading similar but not dissimilar others?" *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 90, Article 104000.