The Impact of Flattery: The Role of Negative Remarks and Self-Efficacy

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Flattery is defined as “communicating positive things about another person without regard to that person’s true qualities” (Fogg & Nass, 1997, 551). Research has addressed this tactic of persuasion in the relationship between the frontline employee and the client (Main et al., 2007). Previous literature (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000) indicated that flattery can backfire once consumer tend to view the salesperson as less sincere when s/he uses flattery. Contrasting with the literature on persuasion tactics, negative feedback in retail settings has been neglected. This study extends our understanding of flattery and consumers’ use of persuasion knowledge by addressing the role negative evaluations from the salesperson play on the consumer’s perceptions of the store agent’s trustworthiness. Based on the extra credit effect and correspondence theory, when a salesperson makes a negative evaluation to a client (contrary to the flattery the client expects), s/he may gain “extra credit” because s/he is perceived to resist the temptation of praising the client to make the sale. Consequently, the client will perceive the frontline employee more trustworthy. Hence, we propose that consumers are less likely to use persuasion knowledge when a salesperson makes negative comments about a product because the salesperson’s behavior signals that s/he is not attempting to persuade the consumer to make the purchase, but is instead performing based on internal disposition. Moreover, we address how clients’ perceptions of sellers’ trustworthiness impact on word of mouth and purchase intentions. To qualify the role of negative evaluations, we investigate how the price of the target product and client self-efficacy modify the relationship between positive/negative comments and trustworthiness.

Marco Teórico:
Campbell and Kirmani (2000) stated that consumers develop knowledge about persuasion motives and tactics and use that knowledge to cope with persuasion episodes. In the present study, we propose that negative salesperson remarks affects consumers’ inferences about persuasion motives underlying salesperson behavior and influences perceptions of salesperson trustworthiness. Based on the extra credit effect (Drachman et al., 1978) and correspondence theory (Jones & Davis, 1965), by making negative evaluations about a product to a client (i.e., expressing a view contrary to what is expected), the salesperson makes his/her true disposition more evident, the ulterior motives less evident, thus enhancing the client’s positive judgments (correspondent attribution). On the other hand, by making positive remarks, the salesperson makes his/her ulterior motives more accessible to the client, thus increasing the client’s negative judgments (non-correspondent attribution). H1: Clients exposed to a negative remark along with a positive remark will perceive a salesperson as more trustworthy than clients exposed to positive remarks only. Using the product price, and based on Campbell and Kirmani (2000) we propose that negative salesperson feedback directed toward the cheaper product will link the salesperson’s behavior with their motivation to sell the more expensive product (non-correspondent attribution). On the other hand, when a salesperson directs a negative remark to a higher priced product, the client may judge that the salesperson is acting against his/her own benefit, thus making the ulterior motives of the salesperson less accessible (correspondent attribution). H2: Clients exposed to a negative remark about a cheaper product will perceive the salesperson as less trustworthy than clients exposed to a negative remark about a more expensive product. A client’s self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982) may moderate the relationship between remarks and assessments of trustworthiness. For clients with low levels of self-efficacy, the remarks will act as a cue on salesclerk’ trustworthiness, since consumers rely more on external sources of information when there is uncertainty or the product is not.
well-known (Giebelhausen et al., 2011). Therefore, negative comments will work well for individuals with low self-efficacy. High self-efficacy may reduce uncertainty feelings related to purchase decisions, so there is less need of external cues, because they are more likely to base their attitudes and behaviors on previous knowledge. In this case, the feedback is not of great relevance for shaping clients’ perceptions of trustworthiness of the salesperson. H3a: When self-efficacy is low, perceptions of salesperson trustworthiness will be more positive for clients exposed to a positive remark plus a negative remark than for clients exposed to positive remarks only. H3b: When self-efficacy is high, perceptions of salesperson trustworthiness will be the same for clients exposed to a positive remark plus a negative remark as for clients exposed to positive remarks only. Credibility gains may influence other key dependent variables. If the client perceives the salesclerk as trustworthy the client is likely to have positive behavioral intentions, such as to spread positive WOM about the company (Gremler et al., 2001) and to show purchase intentions (Macintosh & Lockshin, 1997). H4: Salesperson trustworthiness will mediate the effects of the remark condition (only positive remarks or positive plus negative remarks) on (a) positive WOM and (b) purchase intentions.

Método de investigação se pertinente:
Study 1: Participants were 61 students. We used a between-subjects experimental design with the valence of the remarks manipulation (two conditions: positive remark only/positive plus negative remark). We asked participants to imagine they had gone to a store to buy a pair of jeans. The participant asks to try on two pairs. The salesperson makes comments after the subject tries on each pair of jeans (e.g., These jeans look (do not look) very good on you). Participants answered the trustworthiness index ($\alpha=.94$) used from Main et al. (2007), WOM ($\alpha=.93$) and purchase intentions ($\alpha=.72$) scales from Zeithaml et al. (1996). To the examination of the existence of attributional processes, participants described, in response to an open-ended question, thoughts they had while reading the scenario. The persuasion knowledge index was formed through the proportion of non-correspondent attributions relative to total thoughts. We made manipulation checks. Study 2: Participants were 81 students. We applied a 2 x 2 factorial between-subject design (two remark conditions: positive only remark/ positive plus negative remark, and two price conditions: higher price for the first jeans/lower price for the first jeans). Our procedures were similar to those used in Study 1, with the insertion of the price of the jeans. We used the same trustworthiness scale ($\alpha=.94$), an open-ended question to test the attribution, and manipulation checks (with the inclusion of a question to check price manipulation). Study 3: Participants were 200 students. We used a 2 (self-efficacy: low/high) x 2 (remark conditions: positive remark only/positive plus negative remark) factorial in a between-subjects design. We presented Study 3 as two independent research studies to avoid demand effects. In part one we applied the self-efficacy manipulation. Participants responded to a questionnaire designed to test their fashion and style abilities and knowledge. After the test, participants received random feedback that indicate: below average to manipulate low self-efficacy or, above average to manipulate high self-efficacy. In part two, the procedures were the same used in Study 1. The scale of trustworthiness ($\alpha=.94$) and the manipulation check for the remark condition were the same used in the Study 1. To check self-efficacy, we added one item about the level of ability and knowledge on fashion and style.

Resultados e contribuições do trabalho para a área:
Study 1: Participants correctly perceive the remark manipulation ($F(1, 49)=58.32$, $p<.001$). Through an ANCOVA ($F(1, 48)=15.40$, $p<.001$), participants in the positive plus negative remark condition ($M=4.58$) perceived the salesperson as more trustworthy than participants in the positive only remark condition ($M=3.05$). This result support H1. We tested if the effect of
remark condition on trustworthiness occurs due to persuasion knowledge. The remark condition had a significant effect on persuasion knowledge (a=-.36, t=-3.63), which in turn had an effect on trustworthiness (b=-2.78, t=-5.57). In addition, the indirect effect of remark condition on trustworthiness through persuasion knowledge is significant and positive (a x b=1.01, z=3.08, p<.01). The direct effect of remark condition on trustworthiness is non-significant (c=.65, t=1.71), which indicate a full mediation. We use the same procedures to verify H4. With WOM as the dependent variable, the path between remark condition and trust (a=1.65, t=3.96) and the path between trust and the dependent variable (b=.52, t=4.65) were significant. The direct effect (c=-.26, t=-.70) was not significant, while the indirect effect was positive and significant (a x b=.85, z=3.06, p<.01), indicating a full mediation. Using intention to purchase as the dependent variable, paths between the independent variable and mediator (a=1.65, t=3.96) and mediator and dependent variable (b=.49, t=5.39) were significant. The direct effect of remark condition on intention to purchase was not significant (c=-.55, t=-1.81). The indirect path was significant and positive (a x b=.82, z=3.23, p<.001), which imply a full mediation. Study 2: Participants perceived correctly remarks (F(1, 79)=57.12, p <.001) and price (F(1, 79)=6.71, p <.01) manipulations. From ANCOVA the interaction between price and remark conditions presented a significant effect on trustworthiness (F(1, 76)=4.72, p<.05). Positive plus negative remark condition participants exposed to the higher price first situation (M=2.74) perceived lower trustworthiness in the salesperson than participants exposed to the lower price first situation (M=4.28; F(1, 50)=12.78, p<.001). In the higher price first condition, participants exposed to positive plus negative remark situation (M=2.74) also presented a lower perceived trustworthiness than participants exposed to the positive only remark situation (M=3.82; F(1, 36)=4.52, p<.05). These results support H2. Study 3: Participants correctly perceived the remarks made by the salesperson (F(1, 198)=57.13, p<.01) and the self-efficacy manipulation (F(1, 198)=646.28, p<.01). A two-way ANCOVA revealed a significant interaction between remark condition and self-efficacy on salesperson’s trustworthiness (F(1, 195)=6.37, p=.01), as predicted in H3. Post hoc tests showed that, as predicted, in the low self-efficacy condition, participants in the positive plus negative remark condition (M=4.50) indicated higher levels of trust in the salesperson than participants in the positive remark only condition (M=3.10; F(1, 88)=20.33, p<.01). On the other hand, in the high self-efficacy condition, participants in the positive plus negative remark condition (M=3.79) and participants in the positive remark only condition (M=3.26) presented similar levels of trust in the salesperson (F(1, 108)=3.42, p>.05). This research presents three major contributions. First, findings show that a negative salesperson remark during an interaction with a client reduces the use of persuasion knowledge by the client. This happens through the elicitation of correspondent attribution that makes the ulterior motives less apparent. Second, in line with Chan and Sengupta’ work (2010), our findings contribute to the understanding of the effect of salesperson persuasion tactics on behavioral intentions. Third, this research sheds light on two boundary conditions of the effect of remarks on trustworthiness judgments: the price of the target product and client self-efficacy. Retail managers could – while taking caution to observe conditions exposed in this research – encourage frontline employees to use negative feedback along with flattery.

Referências bibliográficas: