

How did you make me do that!?

Circumventing the activation of persuasion knowledge in consumers, with fluently processed semantic associations

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Statement of Originality

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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Signed

The following referred conference presentation, and associated journal publication (Australian Business Deans Council ranking: 'B'), is based upon research reported in Study 1 of this dissertation:

KOZARY, B. (2014) Smile: You Haven't Seen This Before! Positivity, False Familiarity, and Consumer Behavior. In J. COTTE and S.L. WOOD (eds), *Advances in Consumer Research (Volume 42)*, Baltimore, USA: Association for Consumer Research, pp. 330-337.

Manuscripts based upon Study 2 and Study 3 are currently being prepared for submission to ranked journal outlets.

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“The PhD is a tremendous journey of personal discovery and intellectual inquiry...”

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Synopsis

In 1994, the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) was published. This model describes how targets (for example, consumers) respond to persuasion attempts from agents (for example, marketers) – and it has since gone on to become one of the most widely cited theories in the consumer research literature.

Spurred by technological innovations, the marketing environment has undergone extensive alteration throughout the past two decades. As a result, there are presently more frequent and varied opportunities for business-to-consumer and consumer-to-consumer interactions, relative to the mid-1990s.

Consequently, the nature of persuasion episodes has evolved beyond the descriptions offered by the PKM, especially with regard to consumers' ability to access and use their persuasion knowledge to defend against persuasion attempts. However, it appears that no efforts have been made to update and expand the model to reflect these changes and their associated implications. This research project therefore seeks to address this oversight, which will help to ensure the continued utility and relevance of an important element of the consumer behaviour field.

Across three studies, this dissertation outlines how seemingly innocuous influences can bypass consumers' persuasion defences (that is, their persuasion knowledge). The first study presents a meta-analysis of 27 research papers, regarding 'positivity-inspired false familiarity'; an effect determined to be reliably of a small-to-medium size. The implications of this finding are investigated through a detailed summary of the persuasion literature, from which a process-based explanation of the potential for persuasion knowledge circumvention is derived.

These processes are further explored in the second study, which examines the psychological and biological attributes underlying attitude formation and execution.

The purpose of this study is to ensure that the processes driving consumers' responses during persuasion episodes can be adequately captured, measured, and interpreted. Five scale modifications are proposed and assessed, with two deemed to be both reliable and valid.

Finally, the third study combines insights from the first two studies. Two experiments show that consumer persuasion knowledge can be circumvented by priming pre-existing, semantic associations – which are processed fluently, in an automatic and nonconscious manner. Three *p*-curve analyses and a mini-meta-analysis are also conducted, which promote confidence in this conclusion, by demonstrating that this 'mere-association effect' has evidential value, and is reliably of a medium size.

Together, these three studies contribute to the development of 1) a modified version of the PKM, when 'mere-association' occurs; and 2) a summary model describing the various factors involved when consumers fluently process semantic associations. These two models have implications for marketers' communication and branding activities; for consumer education programs; and for policy agencies' regulatory considerations. Limitations and future research priorities are also discussed.