

Researchers show how 'theory of mind' influences advertising skepticism

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Product marketers should be clear in their messaging to avoid customer skepticism that makes them feel duped, according to University of Oregon research.

At issue in a new study, published in the *Journal of Business Research*, was a social-cognitive construct called [theory of mind](#), which considers how well people assess the mental states and apparent goals of others.

Developmental psychologists link it to an ability to show empathy. In business, the study, led by former UO doctoral student Elizabeth Minton, showed it also can influence a person's recognition of being persuaded. And that affects a person's evaluation and willingness to buy a product, she found.

"There has been some research on adult [theory](#) of mind, particularly in understanding sales communications," said co-author T. Bettina Cornwell, head of the Department of Marketing and a Philip H. Knight Chair at the UO. "However, there hasn't been a lot of attention to variations of how it

plays out."

In young children, Cornwell said, theory of mind is easily seen. For them, she said, their parent's minds and aspirations are their minds, too. If a child wants a doll for a birthday, then mom does, too. Later a child separates that thinking, realizing that mom may instead prefer perfume or dinner out.

In the project, Minton, now an associate professor of marketing at the University of Wyoming, designed four experiments in collaboration with Cornwell and Hong Yuan, the Richard P. Booth Associate Professor and Research Scholar of marketing and director of the UO's Business Research Institute.

"We wanted to know when the recognition of persuasion becomes particularly important," Minton said. "At what point will a person be misled?"

The first experiment involved a pool of 61 online participants who considered a visual with a character describing "a soap that smells good and is gentle on your hands." A second condition had the additional text, "You HAVE to buy it." Result found that no matter the text in the advertisement, higher theory of mind increased skepticism and, in turn, attitudes toward the product and purchase intentions declined.

Next, 238 subjects were recruited from the customer database of a real company that produces a stevia leaf cocoa syrup. All saw the same general text about the sweetener but across three ads the accompanying visuals changed. One ad had no additional visuals or text, one showed an outline of a girl on a bicycle with a persuasive message, and the last with an added bubble containing persuasive words spoken by the girl.

Again, the pattern of results showed that across the advertising types, theory of mind increased advertising skepticism and, in turn, attitude,

purchase intentions and willingness to pay for the product declined.

A third experiment dealt with transparency. An online group of 200 adults saw an advertisement for a limited time offer to get seven packets of seed butter for free but with shipping costs of \$10.99. About half of the participants saw the price information on the same page ([high transparency](#)) and the rest on a second page (low transparency).

Same-page high transparency produced little skepticism. The delayed low transparency presentation, however, significantly raised flags of skepticism and reduced the subjects' attitudes, purchase intentions and willingness to pay.

"This clearly showed us a sense of transparency that people appreciated," Yuan said. "It tells us that we, as advertisers and marketers, probably need to focus on transparency."

The final experiment, with 215 undergraduate students, considered possible boundaries to how theory of mind influences advertising skepticism as found in the first three studies. Participants viewed one advertisement that was either a private-use item (socks) or a public use item (a graphic T-shirt) with varied text and visuals.

The logic is that because theory of mind is a social processing capability, the researchers said, it might be emphasized in a situation where the product is publicly seen and noticeable.

Skepticism, as in previous experiments, remained high in participants with high levels of theory of mind, but the private-versus-public nature had strong effects. Those showing higher skepticism reported higher valuations for the private products, while participants with lower levels of skepticism showed higher valuation for the public products.

"These findings continue to provide evidence for the importance of understanding theory of mind's influence on response to potential persuasion episodes and the interaction with a product's private versus public nature," the researchers suggest.

The study, Minton said, opens a public policy question about advertising being allowed to potentially persuade people who haven't developed a strong theory of mind.

"It's probably not advantageous for marketers to promote a product in a way that has low transparency and makes a consumer have to work hard to understand the offer," Cornwell said.

"One, consumers who don't have high theory of mind may be duped then frustrated while those who have high theory of [mind](#), and thus more [skepticism](#), will be irritated by the way the offer is presented and be less willing to buy," she said. "Neither of the outcomes is good."

More information: Elizabeth A. Minton et al, I know what you are thinking: How theory of mind is employed in product evaluations, *Journal of Business Research* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.02.002](#)

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