

## Deliberative and Automatic Bases of Suspicion: Empirical Evidence of the Sinister Attribution Error

Kelley J. Main

*York University*

Darren W. Dahl

*University of British Columbia*

Peter R. Darke

*University of British Columbia and Florida State University*

This research explores perceptions of interpersonal influence in the form of flattery that occurs in a consumer retail setting. Across 4 experiments, results demonstrate empirical evidence of a sinister attribution error (Kramer, 1994), as consumer reactions to flattery were more negative than warranted by the situation. Results across 3 experiments demonstrated that there are 2 types of information processing occurring when consumers make trust judgments in response to flattery. Depending on when flattery occurs, consumers engage in either automatic or deliberative processing of information provided by the sales context. The final experiment further suggests that the automatic processing occurred through categorization based on social cues.

Increasing attention has been devoted to understanding how consumers respond to interpersonal persuasion attempts by agents in the marketplace (e.g., DeCarlo, 2005; Friestad & Wright, 1994; Sujan, Bettman, & Sujan, 1986; Wright, 2002). Initial investigations of the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM; Friestad & Wright, 1994) have attempted to clarify the conditions under which consumers are able to use their persuasion knowledge in making judgments of sales agent communications. Campbell and Kirmani (2000) exemplified this model in their demonstration of the importance of ulterior motive accessibility and cognitive capacity on consumer perceptions of a sales agent. This initial work indicated that consumers with sufficient cognitive resources were better able to identify ulterior motives and adjust their perceptions to account for the sales agent's motives, thereby leading to more accurate judgments. These effects occurred through a relatively thoughtful attributional process, which was disrupted by manipulations of cognitive load.

This research builds on this work by identifying the role of a *sinister attribution error* in consumer judgments regarding the behavior of sales agents. The sinister attribution error refers to a pattern of misattribution characterized by irrational distrust (Kramer, 1994), wherein individuals misperceive the behavior of others and are overly suspicious of their intentions given the objective circumstances. We examined whether consumers adequately consider situational factors when making judgments concerning a compliment offered from a sales agent. In some cases a plausible ulterior motive existed for this compliment (e.g., the salesperson is trying to make a sale), whereas in other cases this ulterior motive was not plausible. Consistent with the sinister attribution error, four experiments showed that consumers continued to distrust a compliment offered by a salesperson even when the ulterior motive was not plausible. The results also indicated this attributional error occurred through automatic processing, without the need for effortful attributional thinking. Finally, the results show flattery from a sales agent acts as a categorization cue that causes consumers to automatically infer sinister intentions. This research contributes to the existing literature by demonstrating that consumers tend to be negatively biased in judgments concerning sales agents, and by showing that this

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Correspondence should be addressed to Peter R. Darke at the Sauder School of Business, University of British Columbia, 2053 Main Mall, Vancouver, British Columbia, V6T 1Z2, Canada. E-mail: peter.darke@sauder.ubc.ca

bias can operate through either automatic or deliberative processing. The next section outlines the attributional framework that guides this research and the goals of each of the four experiments that follow.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Interpersonal influence occurs when one person tries to change the attitudes, beliefs or behaviors of another person (van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, Blaauw, & Vermunt, 1999). Flattery is a very common form of interpersonal influence. There is ample evidence in psychology and organizational behavior to suggest that flattery has positive effects on judgment and behavior (see, e.g., Cialdini, 2000; Gould & Penley, 1984; Judge & Bretz, 1994; Watt, 1993; Wayne & Ferris, 1990). This finding has been confirmed through surveys (e.g., Higgins & Judge, 2004), experiments (e.g., Fogg & Nass, 1997) and meta-analysis (Gordon, 1996). Despite this evidence, other research suggests that flattery can also have negative effects under certain circumstances. In particular, it has been argued that the degree to which the actor is dependent on the target for rewards can lead to negative perceptions of flattery or the flatterer (Jones & Wortman, 1973; Vonk, 1998, 1999).

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994) provides a conceptual basis for understanding how consumers respond to interpersonal communications. According to this model, consumers respond to persuasion attempts such as flattery by drawing on relevant knowledge of the influence tactic and situational characteristics in order to make inferences about the motivations behind the persuasion attempt (Friestad & Wright, 1994). This analysis relies in part on the basic tenets of attribution theory, wherein individuals attempt to answer the question of “why” behavior occurs when interpreting the actions of others (Kelley, 1972). When trying to make inferences about others, attribution theory suggests that individuals typically determine whether the behavior was the result of an external or internal factor—the situation or the person respectively (Kelley, 1972). According to the discounting principle, people should discount the role of any single explanation for the observed behavior to the degree that a plausible alternative explanation exists. In a retail sales setting where consumers are flattered by a salesclerk, this principle suggests that situational factors should also be considered, such as whether the salesclerk is simply trying to meet a sales goal or obtain a commission (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). To the degree that such alternative explanations seem plausible, the discounting principle suggests that consumers should be less likely to perceive the flattery as genuine, and more likely to attribute this behavior to the ulterior sales motive.

Despite the normative prescriptions of attribution theory, early research suggested that individuals often fail to discount appropriately for situational factors when making

causal inferences (Ross, 1977). This phenomenon was dubbed the fundamental attribution error, and numerous studies suggest this error is rather robust (see Fiske & Taylor, 1984). Subsequent studies showed that the fundamental attribution error occurs through a combination of automatic and deliberative processing, where behavior is initially attributed to internal factors through an automatic process, and later corrected for situational constraints through a more deliberative process (Gilbert, Jones, & Pelham, 1987; Trope, 1986). Since the correction process requires greater cognitive resources, and such resources are often limited, the automatic process tends to dominate, and attributions are typically undercorrected for situational constraints.

The existing research on ulterior motives provides an important exception to the typical violation of the discounting principle. In particular, a series of studies by Fein and colleagues found that a plausible ulterior motive caused individuals to become suspicious of the target’s true intentions, and consistently led them to discount attributions to better account for the alternative possibility (Fein, Hilton, & Miller, 1990; Fein, 1996). These effects occurred through a deliberative attributional process, where ulterior motives induced more careful thinking about the potential explanations for the target’s behavior. In a consumer context, Campbell and Kirmani (2000) built on this research by arguing that the accessibility of ulterior motives was one of the key factors determining whether consumers successfully use persuasion knowledge in interpreting the behavior of a sales agent. Their results suggest consumers are more likely to use persuasion knowledge when an ulterior motive is more accessible (i.e., when flattery occurred before purchase) than when the same motive is less accessible (i.e., when flattery occurred after purchase). Further, ulterior motives were again shown to operate through a deliberative attributional process as consumers were unable to correct their judgments in the face of cognitive resource constraints (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). Overall, the existing evidence suggests that the suspicion induced by ulterior motives tends to improve the accuracy of judgment by producing attributions that are more consistent with the prescriptions of the discounting principle, and that such suspicions tend to operate through deliberative information processing (see also Vonk, 1998, 1999).

In contrast to the view that distrust induces more accurate judgment, Kramer’s (1998) paranoid cognition model proposes that individuals can be overly or irrationally suspicious under certain circumstances, and that such suspicion can induce persistent biases in perception and judgment. For instance, suspicion can lead to exaggerated perceptions of conspiracy, where individuals overestimate the coordination of influence attempts that are made by others. Suspicion can also undermine or suppress information that is diagnostic of the truth, ultimately leading to judgments that verify initial suspicions. Most relevant to this research, Kramer (1999a) suggested that suspicion can lead to a sinister attribution

error, where individuals attribute harmful intentions to others despite the fact that such inferences are not warranted by the objective circumstances. For instance, Kramer (1994) showed that suspicious individuals are more likely to infer their partner deliberately cheated them on a task, despite the fact the outcomes were actually determined by chance, and therefore could not have been controlled by their partner.

We suggest that similar forms of irrational suspicion are likely to operate in the context of sales transactions, since consumers often associate sales contexts with relatively high levels of distrust. For instance, a recent survey found that consumers are highly distrustful of salespeople (Ipsos-Reid, 2003). Only 10 percent of consumers expressed any degree of trust in sales agents, which was second only to national politicians (9%), and noticeably below the levels of other professions such as reporters (27%), lawyers (29%), and auto mechanics (33%). These findings are consistent with other evidence that suggests consumers are often distrustful of marketing situations (Darke & Ritchie, 2007; Forehand & Grier, 2003; Obermiller & Spangenberg, 2000). The main goal of this research was to test for the potential of a sinister attribution error by re-examining consumer judgment in the kinds of sales transactions used in past research by Campbell and Kirmani (2000). This was done by including an additional no-flattery condition which better isolated the effects of flattery that occurred after purchase. The logic was that flattery after the sale does not provide a plausible ulterior sales motive for the compliment, and therefore any negative effects of flattery on perceptions of trustworthiness under these circumstances would serve as direct evidence for the sinister attribution error, because such suspicions are unwarranted by the objective circumstances.

A second goal of this research was to examine the role of deliberative and automatic processing in sinister attributions. The bulk of existing theory has focused on deliberative attributional processing to account for the effects of ulterior motives on consumer judgment (e.g., Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Fein, 1996; Priester & Petty, 2003). However, other evidence suggests that suspicion can also operate in a relatively automatic fashion (Darke & Ritchie, 2007). In this case, judgments are based on simple associations made between the source of information and perceptions of the general trustworthiness of the group to which the source belongs (Kramer, 1999b). Such judgments are schema-based, and occur automatically with little or no deliberate information processing (Schul, Mayo, & Burnstein, 2004). Moreover, recent evidence suggests that these kinds of schema-based categorization effects can bias attribution even when adequate cognitive resources are available to engage in deliberative thought (Trope & Gaunt, 1999).

Based on all the available evidence, we predicted that trust judgments regarding flattery from a salesperson would function through a combination of deliberative and automatic processing. In accordance with the previous findings of Campbell and Kirmani (2000), the effects of flattery

before the sale on trust should be largely mediated by deliberative processing. In contrast, any suspicion associated with flattery after the sale seemed unlikely to be due to deliberative processing, since effortful thought should lead consumers to properly account for the fact that the ulterior motive is implausible in this case. Instead, any residual effects of flattery on suspicion were likely to operate through automatic processing; based on simple negative associations for the untrustworthiness of sales agents as a group. More specific predictions are made in the context of each experiment.

### EXPERIMENT 1A: CONSUMER RESPONSES TO FLATTERY DURING AN ACTUAL SALES TRANSACTION

The objective of the first study was to examine consumer reactions to flattery in an actual retail sales context. Normatively speaking (Kelley, 1972), consumers should adjust their perceptions of the clerk's trustworthiness to account for the ulterior sales motive when flattery is received before the purchase, but no adjustment is necessary when flattery occurs after the purchase because the sales motive is no longer plausible. In contrast, the sinister attribution hypothesis predicts that consumers may respond negatively to flattery even when the ulterior motive is not plausible. This would be revealed by a more negative response in consumer perceptions of trustworthiness when flattery occurs after the purchase, relative to a control group that does not receive any flattery. A further question of interest was whether these perceptions occur through deliberative or automatic processing. It was expected that flattery occurring before the sale would impact judgments via deliberative processing as was demonstrated in Campbell and Kirmani (2000), whereas flattery occurring after the sale was more likely to operate through automatic processing consistent with Trope and Gaunt (1999). Therefore, we predicted that the effects of flattery on judgments of trustworthiness would be mediated by persuasion knowledge only when flattery occurred before purchase.

#### Design and Procedure

Participants were 102 students (37 males and 65 females) from a large west coast university who received course credit for their participation. A between-subjects experimental design was used with Flattery (no flattery control, flattery before purchase, flattery after purchase) as the experimental factor. When participants met the experimenter, they were informed that the study concerned consumer experiences while shopping in different types of retail outlets. Participants were told that they would be going shopping in one of the retail locations on campus and would be given money to make the required purchase. They

then chose an envelope that identified a product and store location. In actuality, all envelopes indicated that the shopping task would involve purchasing sunglasses at a retail booth located in the main student building on campus. Participants were instructed to find the retailer selling sunglasses, to try on a few pairs, and to purchase the pair they liked best before returning to the experimenter.

The retail outlet was operated by the experimenter and was staffed by undergraduate student salesclerks, a common practice in the marketplace. The booth was set up in the Student Union Building where vendors display their wares during scheduled marketplace weeks throughout the term. On this particular week, other booths were selling a variety of items including scarves, hats, jewelry and books. There were at least 40 pairs of sunglasses on the table at all times with signs on the table that clearly marked the price of the sunglasses as well as a cash box, a receipt book and a mirror that consumers could use to see how the sunglasses looked when they tried them on. The experiment was run across 5 days in order to minimize the chances that students would be able to discuss the experimental procedures.

The flattery manipulation was administered by the salesclerks who were confederates of the experimenter. The confederate salesclerk was blind to the experimental hypotheses. All salesclerks were female, a choice partially dictated by the number of female salesclerks running the other retail booths in the marketplace. The salesclerk initially addressed all the participants by saying, "Hi, can I help you?" The flattery manipulation was executed by the confederate after consumers had tried on at least two pairs of sunglasses and included three statements: "That's a great pair of sunglasses. I think they look good on you. They really suit you." Participants assigned to the before purchase condition were flattered after they had tried on at least two pairs of sunglasses but before their purchase decision was made. For those participants assigned to the flattery after purchase condition, the same line was only stated after participants had made their purchase. After the purchase was complete, all participants were given a receipt for their purchase in a bag along with their product and were thanked for their purchase. Participants in the control condition were not flattered but still received the opening and closing lines as other participants to ensure a minimal interaction with the salesclerk.

After making their purchase, all participants returned to the experimenter to complete a final questionnaire. To maintain the integrity of the cover story, a number of questions regarding the shopping experience followed. Embedded in these questions was a series of scale measures that assessed perceptions of the salesclerk. This *salesclerk trustworthiness* index consisted of 7 seven-point Likert scale items (sincere, honest, trustworthy, fake(r), phony(r), manipulative(r), pushy(r),  $\alpha=.74$ ) drawn from previous research (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Kramer, 1998; Vonk, 1998). *Persuasion knowledge* was measured at the end of the questionnaire with 2 items (The sales clerk told me

I looked nice in the sunglasses to influence my purchase, The sales clerk only complimented me in order to influence my purchase decision,  $r=.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Participants then completed two manipulation checks, which asked them to indicate whether they were flattered while shopping and when that flattery occurred. These items were scored as correct or incorrect. The final questions were gender, age, faculty of study, and a suspicion probe. Gender did not have an influence upon any of the independent variables in this or any other experiment and will therefore not be discussed further. Two participants reported being suspicious that the retail outlet was connected to the study and were eliminated from the subsequent analysis. Finally, none of the confederate salesclerks reported knowing any of the participants.

## Results and Discussion

The manipulation checks showed participants were able to correctly distinguish whether they were flattered,  $\chi^2(1, N=101)=6.03$ ,  $p < .05$ , and when the flattery occurred,  $\chi^2(1, N=101)=5.49$ ,  $p < .05$ . In addition, a one-way ANOVA indicated a significant main effect of flattery on trustworthiness,  $F(2, 96)=4.78$ ,  $p < .01$ . The means for the control condition, flattery after, and flattery before purchase were 5.08, 4.50, and 4.47, respectively. Post-hoc comparisons indicated that the control and flattery before conditions were significantly different ( $p < .01$ ), as were the control and flattery after conditions ( $p < .01$ ). The flattery before and flattery after conditions did not significantly differ from one another. Results for persuasion knowledge also indicated a significant influence of flattery,  $F(2, 96)=36.26$ ,  $p < .01$ . Persuasion knowledge was highest in the before purchase condition ( $M=5.02$ ) followed by the after condition ( $M=3.42$ ) and lowest in the no flattery condition ( $M=1.61$ , all conditions were significantly different from each other,  $ps > .001$ ).

Mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986) was conducted for perceptions of trustworthiness with persuasion knowledge as the mediating variable. Mediation is demonstrated if the presence of the mediator (persuasion knowledge) as a covariate in the model substantially decreases the effect of the independent variable (flattery) on the dependent variable (perceptions of trustworthiness). This analysis was conducted separately for the two flattery conditions. The analysis comparing the control condition against those in the flattery before purchase condition showed evidence of cognitive mediation. Persuasion knowledge significantly predicted perceptions of trustworthiness,  $F(1, 64)=103.74$ ,  $p < .001$ , and accounting for this covariate greatly reduced the effects of flattery on perceptions of trustworthiness ( $F=6.95$ ,  $p < .01$  reduced to  $F < 1$ ,  $ns$ ). These findings are consistent with the prediction that flattery before purchase would act via more deliberative processing. In contrast, the mediation analysis comparing the control and flattery after purchase conditions suggested

the effects of flattery operated via automatic processing. Specifically, persuasion knowledge failed to predict perceptions of trustworthiness ( $F < 1$ , *ns*), and the effects of flattery remained significant after accounting for this covariate ( $F=11.80$ ,  $p < .001$  became  $F=7.00$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Summary.** Overall, these findings demonstrate that consumers had negative reactions to flattery regardless of when it occurred. Interestingly, it appeared to be the salesperson's flattery in-and-of-itself that acted as a salient cue for consumers. While negative reactions to flattery before purchase are rational, negative reactions to flattery after purchase provide evidence for the sinister attribution error, because suspicion is not warranted given there was no plausible sales motive in this case. Further, results for the mediation analysis indicate that consumers' negative judgments regarding the salesclerk occurred through deliberative processing when the flattery came before the purchase and through automatic processing when flattery came after the purchase. These findings are consistent with prior research demonstrating the automatic nature of inferential judgments (e.g., tactic recognition heuristics; Friestad & Wright, 1994; Trope & Gaunt, 1999).

#### EXPERIMENT 1B: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF ATTRIBUTIONS IN CONSUMER RESPONSES TO FLATTERY

The goal of this experiment was to further examine the information processing underlying judgments of distrust made in response to flattery. We examined this question using the more controlled context of a scenario study, and included an additional measure of any attributional thoughts that consumers had when reading the scenario in contrast to the previously used measure of persuasion knowledge. Given the susceptibility of persuasion knowledge measures to demand effects as discussed by Campbell and Kirmani (2000), we chose to measure self-reported attributional thoughts. Consumers should adjust their attributions to account for the ulterior sales motive when flattery is received before the purchase, but no adjustment is necessary when flattery occurs after the purchase because the sales motive is not plausible. Consistent with Experiment 1a, evidence for deliberative processing would be provided if the effects of flattery on judgments of trustworthiness were mediated by reported attributional thoughts, whereas flattery effects that occurred in the absence of cognitive mediation would be consistent with automatic processing.

#### Design and Procedure

Seventy-eight students from a large west coast university completed a shopping scenario study for course credit. One person was deleted from the analysis for not following

instructions, leaving a total of 77 participants (34 males and 43 females). Once again, a between-subjects experimental design was used, with Flattery (no flattery control, flattery before purchase, flattery after purchase) as the experimental factor. Each participant read a brief scenario describing a shopping experience in which they were asked to imagine they had gone shopping and had purchased a new jacket (for a full description see Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). The scenario indicated participants interacted with a salesclerk during their shopping experience. The flattery manipulation was implemented using the same statements in Experiment 1a. Once participants read the scenario, they were asked to describe any thoughts they had while reading the shopping scenario. Participants were given one page of space in which to record their thoughts. These responses were coded by two trained research assistants into two dichotomous categories of attributional thoughts: positive (e.g., the salesclerk was helpful in giving me advice or I trusted her opinion) or negative (e.g., she was nice because she was working on commission or the salesclerk was phony) attributional thoughts about the sales agent's behavior. Attributions of trustworthiness and suspicion were coded as positive and negative respectively. More general thoughts were not coded. Coder agreement was 90% and disagreements were resolved through discussion with the first author. A difference score was calculated by subtracting negative attributional thoughts from positive attributional thoughts to form an overall measure of *valenced attributional thoughts*. Following the thought listing, participants completed the same trustworthiness items ( $\alpha=.81$ ) and manipulation checks as utilized in the prior study.

#### Results and Discussion

**Manipulation checks.** The manipulations were once again effective. Participants were able to correctly identify if and when they were flattered,  $\chi^2(2, N=75)=5.98$ ,  $p < .05$ .

**Salesclerk trustworthiness.** A one-way ANOVA showed flattery had a significant influence on perceptions of the clerk's trustworthiness,  $F(2, 74)=10.30$ ,  $p < .001$ . Post-hoc comparisons indicated that all conditions were significantly different from each other (all  $ps < .05$ ). Perceptions of the clerk's trustworthiness were lowest when consumers were flattered before purchase ( $M=3.33$ ). Further, those in the flattery after purchase condition also rated the clerk as significantly less trustworthy ( $M=3.85$ ) than participants in the control condition ( $M=4.47$ ).

**Attributional thoughts.** Results for attributional thoughts also revealed a significant effect of flattery,  $F(2, 74)=10.93$ ,  $p < .001$ . Attributional thoughts were more negative than positive in the flattery before purchase condition ( $M=-1.10$ ) than in either the control condition ( $M=-0.08$ ,  $p < .01$ ) or the flattery after purchase condition

( $M = -0.27$ ,  $p < .01$ ), while the latter conditions did not differ from each other ( $p > .20$ ).

**Mediation.** Mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986) was conducted for perceptions of trustworthiness with attributional thoughts as the mediating variable similar to Experiment 1a and was conducted separately for the two flattery conditions. The analysis comparing the control condition against those in the flattery before purchase condition showed evidence of cognitive mediation. Attributional thoughts significantly predicted perceptions of trustworthiness,  $F(1, 49) = 27.46$ ,  $p < .001$ , and accounting for this covariate greatly reduced the effects of flattery on perceptions of trustworthiness ( $F = 20.62$ ,  $p < .001$  reduced to  $F = 3.54$ ,  $p < .10$ ). These findings are consistent with the prediction that flattery before purchase would act via more deliberative processing.

In contrast, the mediation analysis comparing the control and flattery after purchase conditions suggested the effects of flattery operated via automatic processing. Specifically, attributional thoughts failed to predict perceptions of trustworthiness,  $F(1, 50) = 2.18$ ,  $ns$ , and the effects of flattery remained significant after accounting for this covariate ( $F = 7.55$ ,  $p < .01$  became  $F = 6.08$ ,  $p < .01$  after accounting for the covariate). Participants responded negatively to the flattery that occurred after purchase without careful deliberation of the objective facts of the situation.

**Summary.** Consistent with previous research (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000) and the first experiment, our findings show that participants who were flattered prior to the purchase perceived the salesclerk as significantly less trustworthy and reported more negative than positive attributional thoughts than participants who were flattered after purchase. These findings are consistent with the idea that participants identified plausible ulterior motives and used them in formulating their judgments. Importantly, our results also showed that participants flattered after purchase had significantly lower perceptions of trustworthiness than those who were not flattered, and these trust perceptions were not driven by attributional thoughts. Given that there was no plausible ulterior sales motive in this case, the results provide further evidence for the sinister attribution error. Finally, the process analyses supported the prediction that suspicion observed for flattery occurring after the purchase was likely to be due to negative associations that consumers made automatically (consistent with Trope & Gaunt, 1999).

## EXPERIMENT 2: THE INFLUENCE OF COGNITIVE LOAD ON THE SINISTER ATTRIBUTION ERROR

The primary goal of Experiment 2 was to examine the influence of cognitive load on the sinister attribution error.

While in Experiment 1 we used process analyses to examine the information processing involved, Experiment 2 directly manipulated the level of cognitive resources available to better isolate the automatic component of trust judgments. It is expected that cognitive load will have a significant effect on trust judgments for consumers who are flattered before purchase because cognitive load should reduce their ability to engage in deliberative attributional thought. However, for consumers flattered after purchase, decreased cognitive resources should not affect their trust judgments given that these judgments are occurring automatically, and therefore are not dependent on cognitive resources.

### Design and Procedure

Participants were 123 undergraduate students (57 males, 65 females and one person who failed to report their gender) from a large west coast university who received course credit for their participation. Each participant read a brief scenario similar to the one used in Experiment 1b with one exception. Instead of informing participants that they were shopping in a traditional retail store, they were informed that they were shopping at a temporary clothing exhibition that was in operation for a short period of time. The scenarios were varied according to a Flattery (no flattery control, flattery after purchase, flattery before purchase)  $\times$  Cognitive-Load (high, low) between-subjects design. The no flattery and salesclerk flattery conditions were the same as those described in Experiment 1b.

In the high cognitive load condition, participants were instructed to remember numbers that appeared in the scenario in the order they appeared (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). Participants were further instructed that they would be tested on the numbers at a later point. There were over a dozen numbers that appeared in the scenario (e.g., 8 racks, 15 jackets, one of three cash registers, etc.). Participants in the no load condition read the same scenario, but they were not told to memorize the numbers.

### Measures

Measures of attributional thoughts (86% agreement), trustworthiness, and the manipulation check for flattery were the same as in the previous experiments. Total thoughts were measured by counting all the relevant thoughts that participants listed in one minute after reading the scenario (96% agreement). Participants were also asked to recall the numbers from the scenario and indicate how hard they concentrated on these numbers (nine-point Likert scale). These measures were used to check the load manipulation.

Results and Discussion

**Manipulation checks.** The effects of flattery were significant on both manipulation checks. Participants were able to correctly identify whether or not flattery occurred,  $\chi^2(1, N=122)=12.54, p < .01$ , and when that flattery occurred,  $\chi^2(1, N=122)=15.23, p < .001$ . The cognitive load manipulation was also effective. Participants in the load condition recalled significantly more numbers ( $M=10.67$ ) than participants in the no load condition ( $M=4.57$ ),  $F(1, 96)=27.76, p < .001$ . A 3 (Flattery)  $\times$  2 (Cognitive Load) ANOVA showed a marginally significant main effect of cognitive load on total thoughts,  $F(1, 117)=3.44, p < .07$ , indicating fewer thoughts under load than no load ( $M_s=2.18$  vs. 2.60, respectively). Finally, participants indicated they concentrated more on the numbers in the load condition as compared to the no load condition ( $M=6.71$  vs. 3.54),  $F(1, 117)=61.69, p < .001$ .

**Trustworthiness.** Flattery had a significant influence on perceptions of trustworthiness,  $F(2, 117)=11.47, p < .001$  (see Table 1 for means), however these effects were not moderated by cognitive load ( $F_s < 1, ns$  for the main effect and interaction). Post-hoc comparisons indicated that trust following flattery before purchase ( $M=4.04$ ) and flattery after purchase ( $M=4.15$ ) was significantly lower than when there was no flattery ( $M=4.85, p < .001$ ) but the flattery conditions did not differ from each other.

**Attributional thoughts.** Results showed a significant main effect of flattery on attributional thoughts,  $F(2, 117)=4.50, p < .01$ , and a main effect of cognitive load,  $F(1, 117)=5.94, p < .05$ , that were qualified by a significant interaction of flattery and cognitive load,  $F(2, 117)=3.13, p < .05$  (see Figure 1). Post-hoc comparisons for consumers flattered before purchase indicated that attributional thoughts were more negative than positive when participants were not under cognitive load ( $M=-0.83$ ) but these negative attributions for flattery before purchase disappeared under cognitive load ( $M=0.05, p < .01$ ). In the flattery after purchase condition, load did not significantly reduce negative attributional thoughts (no load  $M=-0.53$

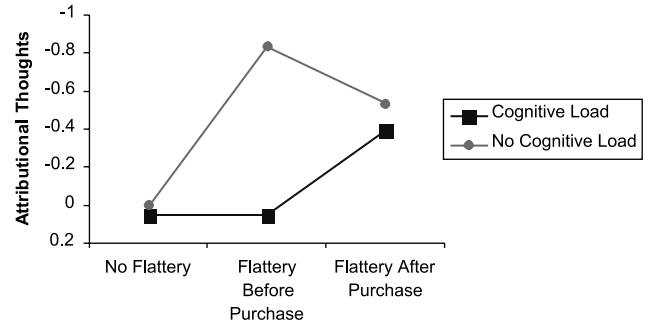


FIGURE 1 Interaction of flattery and cognitive load on attributional thoughts.

vs. load  $M=-0.39, NS$ ) and the same pattern was observed in the control condition ( $M=0.05$  vs. 0.00,  $NS$ ).

**Summary.** The results of this study suggest that the load manipulation significantly reduced negative attributional thoughts for those flattered before purchase while it had no significant effect on those flattered after purchase. These findings are consistent with the prediction that judgment was deliberative for those flattered before purchase whereas those flattered after purchase made these judgments in a more automatic fashion. Therefore, this study provided experimental evidence for the automatic nature of consumer judgments of trustworthiness.

EXPERIMENT 3: THE EFFECT OF CATEGORIZATION ON THE SINISTER ATTRIBUTION ERROR

The primary goal of the final experiment was to further examine the automatic process involved in judgments of trust for flattery after purchase. According to Trope (1986), a number of different social cues can be used to make automatic inferences about the behavior of others through categorization (similar to PKM's tactic recognition heuristics; Friestad & Wright, 1994). These social cues can include expectations about the behavior that is typically displayed by members of certain social groups, such as stereotypes about the truthfulness or honesty of the group members (Kramer, 1999a). This final experiment utilized three different sources of flattery that came from: a salesclerk, a friend, and a salesclerk who was also a friend. In particular, this study examined whether trust judgments would occur through an automatic categorization process that would operate regardless of cognitive load. If consumer suspicion concerning flattery after purchase operates through automatic processing, the social cues should have an impact on judgments of trust under both high and low cognitive load, whereas cognitive load would be expected to disrupt any deliberative information processing.

TABLE 1  
Experiment 2: Cell Means for Main Dependent Variables

	Attributions	Trust
No cognitive load		
No flattery	0.00	4.88
Flattery before	-0.83	4.11
Flattery after	-0.53	4.13
Cognitive load		
No flattery	0.05	4.83
Flattery before	0.05	3.97
Flattery after	-0.39	4.16

## Design and Procedure

Participants were 171 undergraduate students (79 males and 94 females) from a large west coast university who received course credit for their participation. Each participant read a brief scenario similar to the ones previously used in Experiment 1b. The scenarios were varied according to a Flattery (no flattery control, salesclerk flattery, salesclerk and friend flattery, friend flattery)  $\times$  Cognitive-Load (high, low) between-subjects design. All flattery occurred *after* the purchase decision was made, meaning there was no plausible ulterior sales motive for the flattery. The no flattery and salesclerk flattery conditions were the same as those described in Experiment 1b. In the salesclerk and friend condition, participants were told the person who flattered them was a friend who also happened to work as a salesclerk in the store. In the friend flattery condition, participants were shopping with a friend who complimented them after they made their purchase. The load manipulation was administered in the same manner as Experiment 2.

## Measures

Measures of attributional thoughts (97% agreement), trustworthiness and total thoughts (89% agreement) were measured in a similar manner as the previous experiment. Trustworthiness in this study was measured towards the flatterer rather than the salesclerk per se. Consumers who were flattered by a salesclerk rated the trustworthiness of the clerk whereas consumers who were flattered by a friend rated the trustworthiness of their friend. One additional manipulation check was required asking the source of the flattery in addition to whether flattery occurred in the scenario. These two questions were scored as correct or incorrect. The manipulation checks for cognitive load were the same as in the previous experiment. Following the manipulation checks, participants completed a suspicion probe. No participants indicated awareness of the experimental hypotheses.

## Results and Discussion

**Manipulation checks.** The effects of flattery were significant on both manipulation checks. Participants were able to correctly identify whether or not flattery occurred,  $\chi^2(3, N=168)=9.54, p < .05$ , and the source of the flattery,  $\chi^2(2, N=169)=12.72, p < .01$ . The cognitive load manipulation was also effective. Participants in the load condition recalled significantly more numbers ( $M=8.39$ ) than participants in the no load condition ( $M=2.88$ ),  $F(1, 117)=41.88, p < .001$ , and indicated they concentrated more on the numbers in the load versus no load condition,  $F(1, 102)=59.53, p < .001$ . Further, a 4 (Flattery)  $\times$  2 (Cognitive Load) ANOVA showed a significant main effect of cognitive load on total thoughts,  $F(1, 163)=14.72, p < .001$ , indicating fewer thoughts under load than no load ( $M_s=4.40$  vs. 5.54).

There was also a significant interaction,  $F(3, 163)=7.00, p < .001$ , which was due to the fact there were relatively few thoughts in the friend condition regardless of cognitive load ( $M_s=4.90$  vs. 4.20, *ns*). The remaining conditions of flattery were significantly different between the load and no load conditions (control  $M=3.00$  vs. 6.31, salesclerk flattery  $M=4.96$  vs. 6.13, salesclerk and friend flattery  $M=4.59$  vs. 5.36, respectively, all  $p_s < .05$ ).

**Trustworthiness.** Flattery had a significant influence on perceptions of trustworthiness,  $F(3, 167)=19.50, p < .001$ , and these effects were not moderated by cognitive load ( $F_s < 1$ , for the main effect and interaction, see Table 2 for means). Post-hoc comparisons indicated that trust in the salesclerk flattery condition ( $M=3.76$ ) was significantly lower than in the no flattery condition ( $M=4.32, p < .001$ ). Given that this flattery occurred after the sale (i.e., the ulterior sales motive was not plausible), this result provided further support for the sinister attribution error. In contrast, flattery that came from a salesperson who was also a friend ( $M=4.20$ ) had little impact on perceptions of trustworthiness relative to controls, while flattery that came from a friend who accompanied participants on the shopping trip had positive effects on perceived trustworthiness ( $M=5.12, p < .001$  relative to controls). Overall, the results indicate that only the combination of flattery and the salesperson led to distrust, and these effects were not limited by cognitive load.

**Attributional thoughts.** Results showed a significant main effect of flattery on attributional thoughts,  $F(3, 163)=4.72, p < .01$ . Post-hoc comparisons indicated that attributional thoughts were relatively neutral in the control condition ( $M=0.13$ ), whereas attributions were significantly more negative than positive in the salesclerk flattery condition ( $M=-1.32, p < .001$ ), and in the salesclerk and friend condition ( $M=-0.83, p < .05$ ). The salesclerk flattery and friend flattery conditions were also significantly different from each other ( $M=-1.32$  and  $M=-0.42$ , respectively,  $p < .05$ ). The control condition was not significantly different from the friend flattery condition ( $p > .10$ ). There was no

TABLE 2  
Experiment 3: Cell Means for Main Dependent Variables

	Attributions	Trust
No cognitive load		
No flattery	0.16	4.40
Salesclerk flattery	-1.32	3.71
Salesclerk/friend flattery	-1.36	4.21
Friend flattery	-0.44	4.04
Cognitive load		
No flattery	0.10	4.24
Salesclerk flattery	-1.32	3.78
Salesclerk/friend flattery	-0.23	4.41
Friend flattery	-0.40	4.36

effect of cognitive load on attributional thoughts for the main effect and the interaction ( $F_s < 1.10$ , *ns*). Despite the fact that valenced thoughts differed across social cues, additional analyses showed that these thoughts did not mediate the effects of flattery on trust judgments when thoughts were covaried ( $F$  from 19.50 to 19.53,  $ps < .001$ ).

**Summary.** The results indicate that consumers use different social cues to form judgments of trustworthiness. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that trust judgments were automatic in nature. While cognitive load undermined participants ability to think carefully about their shopping experience (i.e., total thoughts were influenced by cognitive load), the categorization effects relating to the friend and sales agent cues occurred regardless of whether cognitive resources were limited or not. Further evidence for the automaticity of these trust judgments was demonstrated by the fact that attributional thoughts did not mediate the effects of flattery on trustworthiness. These findings are consistent with the predicted categorization mechanism (Kramer, 1999a; Trope, 1986).

This study provided further evidence for the existence of the sinister attribution error as participants showed suspicion despite the fact the ulterior sales motive was not plausible given that flattery always occurred after the sale. In addition, this experiment demonstrated that the type of social cue was an important boundary condition for the effects of flattery on suspicion. Ratings of trustworthiness were more negative when flattery after purchase originated from a sales agent, and not when it came from others in the same situation such as a friend (even if that friend was also the sales agent). It is not simply the presence of flattery in a sales setting that stimulates negative responses; only flattery from an unknown salesperson proved capable of inducing suspicion.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Previous research (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Fein, 1996) shows that trust judgments occurred through a deliberative process, which led to greater accuracy in the sense that judgments were appropriately discounted for plausible ulterior motives (Kelley, 1972). Experiment 1b replicated the deliberative effects of flattery that occurred before purchase. Building on these findings, this research makes two important contributions. First, our studies showed that consumers also make judgments of trustworthiness through a more automatic process. Suspicion was evoked automatically, without the need for deliberation, when flattery occurred after the sale. Overall, there were a number of sources of evidence that suggested trust judgments were made through a combination of deliberative and automatic processing. For instance, process analyses using measures of both persuasion knowledge and attributional thoughts showed that judgments of trust were mediated by conscious

attributions when flattery occurred before purchase (consistent with deliberative processing), but not when flattery occurred after purchase (consistent with automatic processing). In addition, an experimental manipulation of cognitive load demonstrated that attributional thoughts were disrupted when flattery occurred before purchase (deliberative processing), but not when flattery occurred after purchase (automatic processing). Consistent with Trope (1986), the final study showed that automatic processing occurred through categorization based on social cues associated with the flatterer.

The second major contribution was that this research suggests flattery can lead to negatively biased judgments of trustworthiness, rather than necessarily producing more accurate judgments (Fein et al., 1990). Flattery that occurred after the sale led to suspicion towards the sales agent despite the fact that there was no plausible ulterior sales motive in this case. In this sense, consumers were overly suspicious of the salesclerk, consistent with the sinister attribution error (Kramer 1994). More broadly, these findings are consistent with Kramer's (1998) suggestion that suspicion often leads to a negative or paranoid bias in judgment. It might be argued that a salesclerk who uses flattery after purchase is attempting to encourage repurchase behavior. If so, this would provide a plausible ulterior motive for such flattery, and therefore suggest that the suspicion observed for flattery after purchase is in fact rational. However, repurchase is an unlikely ulterior motive in our research for a number of reasons. First, participants failed to mention this motive in any of the thought listings (Experiments 1b, 2 and 3). Second, the design of two of the experiments precluded any reasonable expectation that the salesclerk intended to encourage repurchase behavior through flattery. Specifically, Experiments 1a and 2 involved a retail context that was temporary in nature (i.e., a temporary retail booth), and therefore there was little opportunity for future repurchase behavior.

The fact that judgments of suspicion occurred automatically provides some explanation as to why participants proved to be vulnerable to the sinister attribution error in these studies. Participants were simply unaware of the source of their suspicions and were therefore unable to correct their trust judgments. In fact, consumers had difficulty correcting for the automatic effects of flattery even when it was possible to deliberate more carefully about their interaction with the sales agent (i.e., automatic suspicion was observed in the no cognitive load condition in Experiments 2 and 3). These findings are consistent with Trope and Gaunt (1999) who suggest that categorization effects can occur even when adequate cognitive resources are available. Overall, the sinister attribution error seemed to be produced through automatic processing in these studies.

These findings have implications for the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994). While the PKM framework does include a role for both deliberative

and automatic processing, the former has received much more research attention than the latter (e.g., Ahluwalia & Burnkrant, 2004; Brown & Krishna, 2004; Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Reinhard, Messner, & Sporer, 2006; Williams, Fitzsimons, & Block, 2004). In addition, while the PKM recognizes persuasion knowledge can lead to biased judgments, the model tends to assume that accuracy goals are the primary concern of consumers using persuasion knowledge. These results suggest that automatic processing and bias play larger roles in the reactions consumers have to persuasion attempts than has been demonstrated to date. These findings add to the complexity of the current debate surrounding conscious and unconscious consumer behavior (e.g., Chartrand, 2005; Dijksterhuis, Smith, van Baaren, & Wigboldus, 2005; Janiszewski & van Osselaer, 2005; Simonson, 2005) and thin-slice judgments of person perception (Alba, 2006; Ambady, Krabbenhoft, & Hogan, 2006; Kardes, 2006; Peracchio & Luna, 2006).

It is of interest to note that the differences between flattery before and after purchase, predicted on the basis of Campbell and Kirmani (2000), were somewhat inconsistent across these studies. Experiment 1a found no difference in suspicion between the flattery conditions in a real store, while a difference did emerge under the more controlled conditions of the scenarios used in Experiment 1b. However these differences were not observed for the scenarios used in Experiment 2. The inconsistency in these differences may partly be due to the fact that flattery after purchase had a surprisingly strong effect on suspicion, which may have made it more difficult to show additional deliberative effects. In contrast, the automatic effects predicted in this research proved to be highly reliable. Overall, the general pattern of results is consistent with the dual process view (Trope & Chaiken, 1999) that automatic forms of judgment tend to be more common across contexts whereas deliberative judgments tend to be more limited in scope. This is due to the higher capacity and motivational requirements of deliberative processing.

One avenue for future research would be to further investigate the role of prior relationships in deflecting the suspicions associated with flattery that occurs in a retail context. Of further interest would be to investigate the influence of any positive statements on consumer suspicion as it is possible that any positive statement from a sales agent could lead to consumer suspicion. Another area for future investigation would involve exploring the influence of consumer's prior expectations on reactions to interpersonal influence. More specifically, it may be that consumers expect a certain amount of flattery in some circumstances (e.g., when a bride tries on a wedding dress, or when a consumer overhears a sales agent flatter another customer). Research on the "extra-credit" effect (Drachman, deCarufel, & Insko, 1978) and on the effects of communicators advocating an unexpected position (see Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Wood & Eagly, 1981) would predict that consumers should respond positively

given that the salesclerk resisted the temptation to use flattery. However, the literature on consumer satisfaction and disconfirmed expectations would predict the opposite reaction, given that consumer dissatisfaction tends to result when initial expectations are not met (e.g., Teas & Palan, 2003). Consumers who expect to be flattered and prepare themselves to resist the persuasion attempt may be dissatisfied when it fails to materialize. For instance, they might be insulted that others were flattered and not themselves.

Over 20 years ago, Pollay (1986) suggested the dishonest actions of marketers were leading consumers to the conclusion that no marketer should be trusted. These findings suggest that consumers today are still highly wary of marketing tactics. A simple compliment from a salesperson was viewed with suspicion even when it was obvious the compliment did not serve any underlying sales motive. In addition, these suspicions seemed so well learned that they occurred automatically, without the need for deliberation. These kinds of reactions would seem to present considerable difficulties for firms that rely extensively on sales interactions to sell their goods.

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