What's Not to Like? Preference Asymmetry in the False Consensus Effect

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Prior research has shown that individuals are often susceptible to a false consensus effect, whereby they overestimate the extent to which others share their opinions. In three studies, we show that the strength of the false consensus effect is moderated by the valence of one's own opinion, such that overestimation of population consensus is greater when an individual likes an alternative as compared to when she or he dislikes it. Further, we show that this moderation of false consensus is driven by the availability of countervalence attributes, that is, disliked attributes in liked alternatives and liked attributes in disliked alternatives. We discuss theoretical and practical implications of these results.

Individuals often need to predict other people's likes and dislikes (Gershoff, Broniarczyk, and West 2001; Hoch 1987). For example, when people offer advice to friends about movies, buy a gift for a loved one, or recommend a restaurant to a colleague, they first have to assess the recipient's likes and dislikes. A large body of research indicates that, in such situations, individuals show a false consensus effect, that is, a tendency to overestimate the extent to which one's own attitudes and opinions are shared by the population at large (Hoch 1988; Marks and Miller 1987; Ross, Greene, and House 1977). In the current article, we contribute to this literature by identifying a new moderator of the false consensus effect, whereby the effect is shown to be stronger for one's likes compared to one's dislikes. Further, we demonstrate that this moderation of the false consensus effect is driven by an availability-based mechanism, such that positive aspects of disliked alternatives are recalled more easily than negative aspects of liked alternatives (Gershoff, Mukherjee, and Mukhopadhyay 2007; Herr and Page 2004).

We begin by reviewing the literature on false consensus and preference asymmetry and developing hypotheses about moderation of the false consensus effect by one's own liking versus disliking. Then, in three studies, we confirm our hypothesized moderation and present evidence for a mechanism based on differential availability of information related to likes and dislikes. Study 1 examines two product categories and shows that false consensus is greater when individuals like, as opposed to dislike, an alternative. Study 2 replicates these results in a third product category and conducts a four-step analysis to confirm the mediating role of availability of information about likes and dislikes. Study 3 provides further support for the proposed mediating mechanism by manipulating availability of information about likes and dislikes. We close by discussing theoretical implications of our results for interpersonal judgments as well as practical implications for individuals in daily life.

THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

False Consensus

Extensive research indicates that people tend to overestimate the extent to which their own attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are shared by others, an effect variously referred to as false consensus, egocentric bias, social projection, and assumed similarity (Hoch 1987). In a typical example of false consensus, individuals have been asked whether they preferred older or more recent movies and have also been asked to estimate the proportion of their peers who were likely to

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prefer older versus more recent movies (Gilovich 1990). Compared to individuals who preferred older movies, those who preferred recent movies tended to estimate that a greater percentage of their peers also would like recent movies. Such false consensus effects in estimates of others' preferences have been found to be robust across many product categories, including sports (Ross et al. 1977), music (Gilovich 1990), and even paint colors (Gilovich, Jennings, and Jennings 1983).

Past research has advanced both motivational and cognitive explanations for the false consensus effect (Mullen et al. 1985; Ross et al. 1977). Some researchers have focused on motivational accounts for false consensus, such as the desire to see one's own attitude and behavior as being in the majority (Sherman, Presson, and Chassin 1984), the desire to expect favorable future group decisions (Crano 1983), and the desire to reduce cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). In addition to these numerous motivational accounts, researchers also have explored cognitive explanations for false consensus based on the availability heuristic (Mullen et al. 1985; Ross et al. 1977; Tversky and Kahneman 1973). According to this latter explanation, individuals estimate the prevalence of views in the population by relying either on the ease with which examples of others who hold an attitude come to mind or the ease with which reasons for holding the attitude come to mind (Mullen et al. 1985). Further, individuals typically find it easier to bring to mind individuals or reasons that support their own views as compared to alternative views, which leads to the false consensus effect through the availability heuristic (Goethals 1986). In the current research, we use this availability account to identify a key boundary condition of the false consensus effect, namely, that false consensus is stronger for one's likes and weaker for one's dislikes. This predicted boundary condition follows from an asymmetry in the valence of attributes associated with dislikes versus likes in memory.

Asymmetry in Likes and Dislikes

Recent research indicates that disliked (as compared to liked) alternatives tend to have more countervalence attributes, defined as attributes with an opposite valence to the overall evaluation of the alternative (Gershoff et al. 2007). As an illustrative example, consider a person who likes one movie and dislikes another movie. Research suggests that, for the liked movie, the person would like most of the underlying attributes, such as the direction, plot, acting, and music, with few, if any, of the attributes being disliked. In other words, liked alternatives tend to be associated with relatively few countervalence (i.e., negative) attributes. In contrast, when a person dislikes a movie, the overall dislike may be caused by one bad attribute among a set of neutral or liked attributes, by a set of normally liked attributes that did not go well together, or by a set of uniformly bad attributes. Consequently, disliked movies are likely to contain a larger number of countervalence (i.e., positive) attributes. Notably, such asymmetry in countervalence attributes between disliked and liked alternatives has been empirically demonstrated in a number of product categories, including movies, wall posters, and ice cream sundaes (Gershoff et al. 2006; 2007). This asymmetry is also consistent with research indicating that disliked as compared to liked alternatives are more likely to have a mix of negatively and positively evaluated attributes (Fischer, Luce, and Jia 2000).

We propose that this asymmetry in countervalence attributes between disliked and liked alternatives leads to a moderation of the false consensus effect, such that the effect is weaker for disliked alternatives and stronger for liked alternatives. As discussed earlier, past research indicates that availability of reasons for one's preference can drive the false consensus effect (Mullen et al. 1985; Tversky and Kahneman 1973). In the current case, since it is relatively easy to think of positive aspects (i.e., countervalence attributes) of disliked alternatives, individuals are likely to be sensitive to the possibility of others liking, or at least being neutral toward, alternatives that they personally dislike. This should dampen individuals' overestimation of population consensus for disliked alternatives, thus reducing the magnitude of the false consensus effect. In contrast, since it is relatively difficult to think of negative features of a liked alternative, the false consensus effect is likely to be stronger for liked alternatives. In the studies that follow, we demonstrate this proposed moderation of false consensus by individuals' own evaluation and also present evidence for our underlying mechanism based on the availability of countervalence attributes.

STUDY 1

Method

For robustness, two sets of stimuli were used in this study. The first set consisted of 27 ice cream sundaes, representing a full factorial array of three ice cream flavors, three liquid toppings, and three solid toppings.[1] The second set comprised 50 images of movie posters that were randomly selected from a popular online poster store. Participants were 222 undergraduate students at the University of Michigan. Of these, 113 participants provided ratings of "like," "neither like nor dislike," or "dislike" for the 27 sundae descriptions, and the remaining 109 provided corresponding ratings for the 50 posters. Participants also provided their estimates of the "percent of other participants in the study" who would rate each sundae/poster as "like," "neither like nor dislike," and "dislike," such that the total summed to 100%. The order of own ratings and estimates of others' ratings was counterbalanced.

Results

Since our goal was to compare false consensus for liking versus disliking, only those who indicated liking or disliking an alternative were included in the analysis. Notably, there

[1] The flavors were vanilla, mint, and cherry; the solid toppings were walnuts, M&Ms, and Gummy Bears; and the liquid toppings were hot fudge, caramel, and pineapple.

was no significant difference in the frequencies of liking versus disliking judgments for either sundaes (36.5% vs. 39.1%; $t(26) = .37$, $p > .50$) or posters (29.7% vs. 36.6%; $t(49) = 1.85$, $p > .10$). In the first step of the analysis, participants' estimated percentages of others' liking and disliking each alternative were recoded into participants' estimates of others with the same or opposite opinion to themselves. Next, the data were pooled across the set of alternatives and analyzed with a 2 × 2 mixed ANOVA with a between-subjects factor of participant's own liking versus disliking for an alternative and a within-subjects factor of same versus opposite opinion. The dependent variable was the percentage estimate of population opinion. The data were analyzed separately for sundaes and posters, and no order effects were observed in either of these stimulus sets.

Sundaes. In the sundae data, consistent with basic false consensus, there was a main effect for the within-subjects factor of same versus opposite opinion. Pooling across the 27 sundaes and across participants' own liking and disliking, participants estimated that a greater percentage of others would share their opinion ($M = 50.8\%$) as compared to holding an opposite opinion ($M = 27.2\%$; $F(1, 2{,}280) = 752.53$, $p < .001$). Further, in support of the proposed moderation of false consensus by one's own evaluation, there was a significant interaction ($F(1, 2{,}280) = 126.57$, $p < .001$), such that those who liked an alternative estimated that a greater percentage of others would share their opinion ($M = 56.1\%$) as compared to holding an opposite opinion ($M = 22.4\%$; $F(1, 1{,}102) = 783.44$, $p < .001$). In contrast, those who disliked an alternative showed this difference to a lesser degree (M's = 45.7% vs. 31.6%; $F(1, 1{,}178) = 126.56$, $p < .001$). Also consistent with the proposed moderation of false consensus, the percentage of others sharing their opinion estimated by those who liked an alternative ($M = 56.1\%$) was greater than the percentage of others sharing their opinion estimated by those who disliked an alternative ($M = 45.7\%$; $F(1, 2{,}280) = 107.06$, $p < .001$).

Note that, in the above analysis, we measured false consensus by comparing participants' population estimates for their own opinions versus opposite opinions. Another measure of false consensus can be constructed by comparing participants' estimates against the actual opinions held by others in the population (Krueger and Zeiger 1993). To the extent that this measure shows individuals overestimating the prevalence of their own views vis-à-vis the actual prevalence of their views in the population, we can conclude that consensus estimates are objectively "false." Specifically, we subtracted the actual percentages of liking and disliking in our dataset from participants' estimates of population opinion to create a measure of overestimation or underestimation, which was then used as the dependent measure in the previous analysis. Consistent with basic false consensus, participants' overestimation of the percentage of others who shared their opinion ($M = 4.4\%$) was greater than the percentage of others who held an opposite opinion ($M = -2.4\%$; $F(1, 2{,}280) = 63.16$, $p < .001$). Further, consistent with the proposed moderation of false consensus, there was a significant interaction of own evaluation by same versus opposite opinion ($F(1, 2{,}280) = 147.65$, $p < .001$). Follow-up analysis showed that participants who liked an alternative tended to report greater overestimations of the percentage of others sharing their opinion ($M = 9.9\%$) as compared to those who disliked an alternative ($M = -0.8\%$; $F(1, 2{,}280) = 109.11$, $p < .001$). Finally, in order to rule out the possibility that a few outlier alternatives were driving the difference in false consensus between likes and dislikes, we examined the degree of false consensus for each of the 27 sundaes separately. Consistent with our overall results, for 20 out of the 27 sundaes (74.1%; $z = 2.50$, $p < .05$), there was greater overestimation of the percentage of similar others by those who liked as compared to disliked an alternative.

Posters. Analyses of the poster data mirrored the above results for ice cream sundaes. Consistent with basic false consensus, participants estimated that a greater percentage of others would share their opinion ($M = 45.2\%$) as compared to holding an opposite opinion ($M = 23.7\%$; $F(1, 3{,}655) = 1{,}377.57$, $p < .001$). There was again a significant interaction ($F(1, 3{,}655) = 11.85$, $p < .001$), such that those who liked an alternative estimated a greater percentage of others would share their opinion ($M = 46.8\%$) as compared to hold an opposite opinion ($M = 23.2\%$; $F(1, 1{,}625) = 815.67$, $p < .001$), while those who disliked an alternative showed this difference to a lesser degree (M's = 43.8% vs. 24.2%; $F(1, 2{,}030) = 593.41$, $p < .001$). Also consistent with our predictions, the percentage of others sharing their opinion estimated by those who liked an alternative ($M = 46.8\%$) was greater than the corresponding estimate by those who disliked an alternative ($M = 43.8\%$; $F(1, 3{,}655) = 14.77$, $p < .001$).

As with the sundae data, the results held when participants' estimates were compared to the actual preferences in the population. Consistent with basic false consensus, participants' overestimation of the percentage of others who shared their opinion ($M = 1.8\%$) was greater than the percentage of others who held an opposite opinion ($M = -0.2\%$; $F(1, 3{,}655) = 16.36$, $p < .001$). Further, in support of the proposed moderation, there was a significant interaction of own evaluation by same versus opposite opinion ($F(1, 3{,}655) = 110.21$, $p < .001$). Follow-up contrasts showed that those who liked an alternative reported greater overestimations of the percentage of others sharing their opinion ($M = 6.5\%$) as compared to those who disliked the alternative ($M = -2.0\%$; $F(1, 3{,}655) = 94.93$, $p < .001$). In addition, as with the sundae data, an item-by-item analysis showed that, for 34 out of the 50 posters (68%; $z = 2.55$, $p < .01$), there was greater overestimation of the percentage of similar others by those who liked an alternative as compared to those who disliked it.

Overall, the results of study 1 supported the basic false consensus effect as well as its proposed moderation by individuals' own evaluations. Across two product categories, individuals overestimated the extent to which others shared their opinions, and this overestimation was more pronounced

for individuals' likes than dislikes. In fact, when compared to actual opinions in the dataset, results indicated that those who dislike an alternative may at times underestimate the extent of population consensus for their own views. In the studies that follow, we replicate the pattern of results of study 1 and present evidence for the underlying mechanism by measuring (study 2) and manipulating (study 3) availability of countervalence attributes.

STUDY 2

The purpose of study 2 was to test the mediating role of availability of countervalence attributes in the false consensus asymmetry between likes and dislikes. Similar to the first study, participants who liked or disliked alternatives were asked to estimate others' evaluations. In addition, unique to study 2, participants provided their own ratings of attributes of the target alternatives, which yielded a measure of the availability of countervalence attributes. Finally, study 2 demonstrated the robustness of the false consensus asymmetry by replicating the results in a third product category, namely, movies.

Method

Sixty undergraduate participants from the University of Michigan were randomly assigned to a two-factor design in which they were either asked to name a movie they had seen and liked or to name a movie that they had seen and disliked. Participants then estimated the percentage of others in the study who would rate the movie as "liked," "neither liked nor disliked," and "disliked," such that the total summed to 100%. Finally, participants used seven-point scales (1 = "terrible"; 7 = "excellent") to rate the acting, directing, plot, writing, and music of their target movie.

Results

As in study 1, participants' estimates of the percentage of others who liked and disliked each alternative were recoded into the percentage of others holding the same versus opposite opinion. The data were analyzed using a 2 × 2 mixed ANOVA with participants' liking versus disliking as a between-subjects factor and same versus opposite opinion as a within-subjects factor. Results again supported the basic false consensus effect as well as its moderation by participants' own evaluations. Supporting the false consensus effect, across liking and disliking conditions, participants estimated that a greater proportion of others would share their opinion ($M = 49.5\%$) versus hold an opposite opinion ($M = 28.8\%$, $F(1, 58) = 18.03$, $p < .001$). Further, as predicted, false consensus was moderated by whether individuals liked or disliked the movie ($F(1, 58) = 7.14$, $p < .01$). For those who liked a movie, estimates were greater for the proportion of others who shared their opinion ($M = 56.0\%$) versus those holding an opposing view ($M = 22.9\%$, $F(1, 58) = 24.76$, $p < .001$). In contrast, for participants who disliked a movie, the difference in estimates of others' holding the same ($M = 42.6\%$) versus opposing opinion ($M = 35.0\%$) was not significant ($F(1, 58) = 1.12$, NS). Also consistent with the proposed moderation, the estimated percentage of others holding the same opinion by those who liked a movie ($M = 56.0\%$) was significantly greater than the corresponding estimate made by those who disliked a movie ($M = 42.6\%$, $F(1, 58) = 6.21$, $p < .05$).

Mediation Analysis. As stated earlier, prior research indicates that disliked alternatives have more countervalence attributes than liked alternatives (Gershoff et al. 2007). Further, we argued that this difference in availability of countervalence attributes drives the moderation of the false consensus effect by one's own evaluation. We tested our proposed mediating mechanism by measuring availability of countervalence attributes from study participants and using this measure as a prospective mediator. Availability of countervalence attributes was measured through participants' ratings of their target movie's attributes, namely, acting, directing, plot, writing, and music. For those who liked a movie, the proportion of these attributes that were negatively rated (i.e., less than the midpoint of the scale) constituted the availability of countervalence attributes. Conversely, for those who disliked a movie, the proportion of positively rated attributes measured availability of countervalence attributes. Consistent with prior research, participants reported a greater proportion of countervalence attributes for disliked ($M = .22$) than for liked movies ($M = .03$; $F(1, 58) = 19.84$, $p < .001$).

The mediating role of countervalence attributes was tested using a four-step mediation analysis (Baron and Kenny 1986). First, there was a significant effect when the estimated percentage of others who held the same opinion as the participant was regressed on a dummy variable for the participant's liking versus disliking of the movie ($\beta = .31$, $t(58) = 2.50$, $p < .02$). Second, liking versus disliking predicted the mediating variable of proportion of countervalence attributes, with fewer countervalence attributes associated with liked versus disliked movies ($\beta = .51$, $t(58) = 4.45$, $p < .001$). Third, the mediating variable predicted individuals' estimates of the percentage of others who shared their opinion after controlling for the effect of liking versus disliking ($\beta = .37$, $t(57) = 2.66$, $p < .01$). Fourth, the effect of liking versus disliking dropped below significance when the mediating variable was included in the regression ($\beta = .13$, $t(57) = .93$; NS); the Sobel test for reduction in effect was significant ($z = 2.28$, $p < .05$; Sobel 1982). Taken together, these results support our proposition that availability of countervalence attributes mediates the false consensus asymmetry between likes versus dislikes.

Recall that, in this study, we measured availability of countervalence attributes by analyzing participants' ratings of movie attributes. Additional evidence for the mediating role of countervalence attributes could be obtained if we manipulated, instead of measured, this prospective mediator. This was accomplished in study 3 by varying participants' perceived difficulty of generating reasons for liking or disliking an alternative. Prior research has shown that having people list an increasing number of reasons to support a position

increases the perceived difficulty of the task, which, in turn, reduces the availability of the reasons being generated (Schwarz et al. 1991). Thus, in study 3, we manipulated the availability of countervalence attributes by instructing participants to list either a few or many countervalence attributes for a target alternative.

STUDY 3

Method

One hundred and three undergraduate participants from the University of Michigan were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (own evaluation: like vs. dislike) × 2 (availability of countervalence attributes: low vs. high) between-subjects design. Depending on the own evaluation condition, participants were asked either to name a movie they liked or to name a movie they disliked. Next, participants were asked to "think of specific things that you may have disliked [liked] about this movie" and to list either three or eight such aspects, depending on condition. Participants then estimated the percentages of others in the study who would rate the movie as "like," "neither like nor dislike," and "dislike," with the total summing to 100%. Finally, participants provided ratings on a seven-point scale to indicate how difficult/easy they found it to think of aspects of the movie that they liked (disliked).

Results

Manipulation Check. The manipulation of countervalence attributes was checked using a 2 × 2 ANOVA with participants' own rating of the movie (like vs. dislike) and the number of listed attributes (three vs. eight) as independent variables and participants' stated difficulty in thinking of countervalence attributes as the dependent variable. Supporting the manipulation, there was a main effect of the number of countervalence attributes on perceived difficulty. Those asked to think of eight countervalence attributes indicated that this was less easy ($M = 1.84$) than those who were asked to think of three countervalence attributes ($M = 2.44$; $F(1, 99) = 4.03$, $p < .05$).

False Consensus. As in the previous studies, participants' estimates were recoded as the percentage holding the same versus the opposite opinion. The data were analyzed using 2 × 2 × 2 mixed analysis of variance with (*a*) between-subjects factor of the participants' own evaluation (like vs. dislike), (*b*) between-subjects factor of the number of countervalence attributes (three vs. eight), and (*c*) within-subjects factor of same versus opposite opinion. The dependent variable was the percentage estimate of population opinion. Results confirmed the basic false consensus effect as well as its moderation by participants' own evaluation. First, consistent with false consensus, participants estimated that a greater percentage of others would share their opinion ($M = 44.1\%$) than would hold an opposite opinion ($M = 25.4\%$; $F(1, 99) = 29.03$, $p < .001$). Second, consistent with moderation of false consensus by own evaluation, there was a significant interaction of own evaluation by same versus opposite opinion ($F(1, 99) = 12.62$, $p < .001$). Follow-up analysis showed that participants in the liked movie condition estimated a greater percentage of others would share their opinion ($M = 51.2\%$) versus hold an opposite opinion ($M = 18.2\%$; $F(1, 99) = 36.88$, $p < .001$). In contrast, among those in the disliked movie condition, there was no significant difference in estimates of others with the same ($M = 37.9\%$) versus opposite opinions ($M = 31.7\%$, $F(1, 99) = 1.47$, NS). Also consistent with the proposed moderation, participants who liked a movie estimated a greater percentage of others would share their opinion ($M = 51.2\%$) as compared to participants who disliked a movie ($M = 37.9\%$, $F(1, 99) = 6.35$, $p < .01$).

Next, we examined the role of countervalence attributes as a driver of the false consensus effect for likes and dislikes. We had argued earlier that it is easier to think of countervalence attributes for disliked alternatives than for liked alternatives and that this difference in availability of countervalence attributes drives the false consensus effect for dislikes and likes. Consistent with our reasoning, participants reported that it was less easy to think of disliked aspects of a liked movie ($M = 1.85$) as compared to liked aspects of a disliked movie ($M = 2.41$; $F(1, 101) = 4.01$, $p < .05$). Further, consistent with our proposed mechanism, there was a significant interaction ($F(1, 99) = 4.09$, $p < .05$) between participants' estimates of others with the same versus opposite ratings and number of countervalence attributes they had to list, such that decreasing the availability of countervalence attributes increased the false consensus effect. When availability of countervalence attributes was decreased by giving participants the difficult task of listing eight countervalence attributes, there was a significant difference between estimates of percentage of others with the same ($M = 49.4\%$) versus opposite ratings ($M = 22.4\%$; $F(1, 99) = 24.89$, $p < .001$). In contrast, when availability of countervalence attributes was facilitated by giving participants the easy task of listing just three countervalence attributes, the difference between estimates of others with the same ($M = 39.4\%$) versus opposite ratings ($M = 28.1\%$) was attenuated, although it remained significant ($F(1, 99) = 4.99$, $p < .05$). Finally, participants' estimated percentage of others sharing opinions with themselves decreased when it was easier to think of countervalence attributes as compared to when it was more difficult ($F(1, 99) = 4.47$, $p < .05$).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The false consensus effect is a robust and well-documented bias in interpersonal judgment (Marks and Miller 1987; Mullen et al. 1985). The studies reported in this article indicate that false consensus is weaker for individuals' dislikes as compared to their likes and that this asymmetry in false consensus is driven by the greater availability of countervalence attributes for dislikes as compared to likes. Study 1 examined two product categories (sundaes and posters)

and found that, as compared to those who disliked an alternative, those who liked it made greater false consensus estimates. Study 2 replicated this finding in a third category (movies) and demonstrated the mediating role of availability of countervalence attributes using a four-step mediation analysis. Study 3 manipulated the availability of countervalence attributes and showed that increasing the availability of such attributes decreased the magnitude of the false consensus effect.

These results make three important contributions to the literature. First, we identify a new moderator of the false consensus effect, namely, individuals' own evaluations. This moderator qualifies a large body of prior research by identifying an important boundary condition within which the false consensus effect operates. Second, we explicate the mechanism underlying asymmetry in false consensus between likes and dislikes—a mechanism based on the differential availability of countervalence attributes. This mechanism was developed by integrating two streams of research, namely, availability in the false consensus effect (Goethals 1986) and difference in countervalence attributes between likes and dislikes (Gershoff et al. 2007). A third contribution of our research is that it provides convergent evidence for our proposed mechanism by measuring, as well as manipulating, availability of countervalence attributes. As predicted, asymmetry in false consensus across likes and dislikes was found to be sensitive to both these methods of varying availability of countervalence attributes.

In this research, we focused on availability of countervalence attributes as a driver of false consensus. Future research could extend this line of research by exploring how other kinds of availability influence population estimates of abilities and beliefs. Prior research on social comparison indicates that individuals often overestimate their own abilities relative to those of others in the population (Burson 2007). The standard explanation for this effect is that those with low true ability (i.e., novices) as compared to those with high true ability (i.e., experts) are less aware of the boundaries of their knowledge and hence are more likely to exaggerate their own capabilities as compared to the capabilities of others. However, another explanation for why people overestimate their own abilities may lie in the availability of factors influencing success and failure. For example, novice drivers may be more sensitive to potential pitfalls that could cause an accident or result in a traffic violation, while expert drivers may focus more on improvement of their driving rather than avoidance of failure. The resulting difference in availability of failures (vs. successes) would then predict greater overestimation of one's ability for experts than for novices. On similar lines, research indicates that there is a fundamental difference in the process underlying judgments of truth and falsity. While judgments of truth arise from a one-step and relatively automatic process, judgments of falsity require a two-step process in which individuals momentarily accept a proposition as true and only subsequently—cognitive resources permitting—evaluate its falsity (Gilbert 1991; Johnson-Laird and Savary 1999). Thus, for propositions believed to be false, individuals can probably think of reasons that would attest to its truth; in contrast, for propositions believed to be true, individuals are less likely to think of reasons for its falsity. The resulting difference in availability of reasons would predict greater overestimation of population consensus for beliefs of truth than for beliefs of falsity.

Although our investigation replicated the proposed asymmetry in false consensus across three product categories, it is possible that specific aspects of product categories could moderate our results. For example, in our data, we observed somewhat greater incidence of false consensus for sundaes than for posters, with 74% of sundaes versus 68% of posters prompting false consensus. One tentative explanation for this difference could be that the sundaes were described in terms of their constituent attributes, while the posters were shown as holistic stimuli. This difference in representation may have privileged our proposed (countervalence) attribute-based mechanism for sundaes as compared to posters. More generally, product categories normally represented by attribute-based descriptions may encourage processing by (countervalence) attributes; hence, they may be more likely to show asymmetry in false consensus than categories that rely on holistic overall impressions. Also, it is worth noting that our investigation was restricted to the domain of hedonic products, which are normally associated with an approach motivation. It is possible that categories that people tend to avoid, such as traffic schools or dentists, suffer from negative halo effects that serve to make their attributes appear uniformly negative. This, in turn, could reduce attribute ambiguity and hence attenuate the false consensus asymmetry observed in the current research. Given these possibilities, future research should investigate the robustness of the false consensus asymmetry across a broader range of product categories.

Finally, our results have implications for consumer and managerial decision making. Individuals often choose gifts and make purchase decisions on behalf of others (Gershoff et al. 2001; Ruth, Otnes, and Brunel 1999). Similarly, managers often make judgments about the tastes of their target customers, such as when designing consumer advertising or when making go/no-go decisions in product development. Our research indicates that decision makers in such situations need to be highly sensitive to the danger of overprojecting their own likes, more so than their own dislikes, onto target consumers. Our research also suggests that decision makers can combat this bias in their judgments by making a conscious effort to think of countervalence attributes for the product or advertisement in question.

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