

research snapshot

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Untrustworthy People Grab Our Attention – Whether We Want Them to or Not

What is this research about?

‘Trust’ has been defined as our willingness to be vulnerable to someone else, to consciously put our fate in the hands of another person. For example, when we as consumers avoid a salesperson who seems untrustworthy, we do so out of self-interest. And if for some reason we can’t avoid that person, then we’ll be alert and try to keep an eye on him or her. Recent research, though, suggests that our attention to such threats is much more automatic, an innate part of the way our minds work. After all, when you’re alone in a jungle it’s much riskier to consciously consider whether or not to ignore a man-eating tiger than to automatically look out for one. Similarly, when we witness an injustice or a violation of trust, we automatically keep an eye on the person we think is responsible for the breach – even when the situation doesn’t directly involve us. But more research on attention capture is needed.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers from York University and the University of Manitoba tried to find out if

What you need to know:

Our automatic attention to injustices and untrustworthy people has the potential to distract us from more relevant concerns. It can make us overly cautious and wary of risk-taking. It can even cause errors in decision-making. There could be a negative impact on our surroundings when we focus on untrustworthy people as a result of second- or third-hand information.

untrustworthy people grab our attention even when we’re not involved with them and have nothing to gain from keeping an eye on them. In a lab, the researchers presented people with information about certain products made by different manufacturers. Some of the info came from manufacturers who were clearly untrustworthy. The researchers wanted to see if the people ignored the untrustworthy manufacturer’s product information or became preoccupied with it – even when they had no real interest in buying the product.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that people became preoccupied with product information from an untrustworthy source – even when they had no use for the product. This suggests that our responses to injustice and untrustworthy sources are automatic and potentially distracting.

How can you use this research?

This research contributes to our knowledge in the area of consumer and organizational behaviour. It enriches our understanding of how our automatic responses can shape our ability, as consumers, to make decisions. It is relevant to anyone involved with decision-making in organizations.

About the Researchers

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Knowledge Mobilization at York

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