Evaluative Conditioning 2.0: Direct and Indirect Attachment of Affect to Brands

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Evaluative conditioning – the increased liking towards a brand by repeated co-occurrences with positive affective stimuli – can result from two processes. Affect can either become directly attached to the brand, or only indirectly, in which case intermediating memory links to the affective stimuli remain necessary. In three experiments we show that which process is active critically depends on the way brands and affective stimuli are presented together. Direct transfer of affect is more robust than indirect affect transfer. Also, only when affect transfer is direct, the brand becomes immune to the negative effects of affective stimuli (e.g., endorsers) losing their luster.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When initially neutral stimuli such as new brands co-occur repeatedly with positively valenced stimuli (such as beautiful pictures, nice music, celebrity-endorsers etc.), we observe that as a result the brand becomes more positively evaluated itself. This repeated-pairings procedure is referred to as “evaluative conditioning” in the literature (for a review, see De Houwer et al. 2001). According to the established theory by De Houwer et al., positive affect only becomes indirectly attached to the brand. The brand becomes more positively evaluated through mediated memory links to the affective stimuli it co-occurred with in the past. Thus, after a sufficient number of co-occurrences, the brand starts to evoke (un)conscious memories to the affective stimulus it co-occurred with in the past. Positive affect experienced towards the brand is caused by the triggering of such memories. In this article, we introduce a new theory, in which we show that—only in specific circumstances—affect can also become directly attached to the brand. In this case, it is the brand itself that acquires the positive affect, without the necessity for further intermediating memories to the affective stimuli.

We show when direct versus indirect affect transfer occurs, which is critically dependent on the way the brands and affective stimuli are presented together. We also show that direct transfer of affect (compared to indirect affect transfer) results in much more stable brand attitudes which are uniquely resistant to retroactive interference from new learning (e.g., advertising clutter) and uniquely resistant to post-conditioning devaluations of the affective stimuli (e.g., celebrity endorsers falling from grace).

We identified two properties of conditioning procedures that determine whether affect becomes directly or indirectly attached to the brand. First, the time gap between the presentations of brand and affective stimuli should be zero for direct affect transfer to be possible. This matches on the distinction between a sequential conditioning procedure and a simultaneous conditioning procedure.

Second, we manipulated whether the brand was repeatedly paired with the same affective stimulus (same pairings condition) versus always with different affective stimuli (different pairings condition). In a same pairings conditioning procedure, it becomes more likely that the brand will evoke (un)conscious memories to the affective stimulus in the future, hence indirect affect transfer is promoted. However, in a different pairings conditioning procedure, there’s no such establishment of a strong link between a brand and a certain affective stimulus, making it unlikely that one will be recalled upon future presentation of the brand. Therefore, different pairings inhibit the indirect transfer of affect.

Combining these deductions, we conclude that in a sequential same pairings conditioning procedure, only indirect affect transfer will occur. In a simultaneous different pairings conditioning procedure, only direct affect transfer will occur. In a simultaneous same pairings conditioning procedure, both types of evaluative learning can occur. In a sequential different pairings conditioning procedure however, evaluative learning should be inhibited because it is not conducive of indirect (due to the different pairings), nor direct (due to the sequential presentation) affect transfer.

We set up a first experiment to test the hypothesis that a sequential different pairings conditioning procedure should lead to less transfer of affect than other procedures.

Experiment 1

Fifty-seven students at a large Southeastern university participated in this experiment in exchange for course credits. We employed a 2 (simultaneous vs. sequential conditioning) x 2 (same vs. different pairings) x 2 (attitudes towards positively vs. neutrally conditioned brands) mixed design with the first two factors manipulated between subjects and the latter manipulated within subjects.

We used pictures of unknown Belgian beers as brands and positive and neutral pictures from the International Affective Pictures System as the affective stimuli.

Confirming our prediction, evaluative conditioning was strongly significant in all conditioning procedures, except in a sequential different pairings condition.

Experiment 2

We directly tested the indirect versus direct nature of the attitude changes caused by evaluative conditioning by investigating what happens when the valence of an affective stimulus suddenly changes after the conditioning phase. On the one hand, when affect transfer is indirect, a brand derives its valence by (un)consciously retrieving the associated affective stimuli. Therefore, the brand’s valence will be tied to the affective stimuli’s valence and a devaluation of the affective stimuli will cause a devaluation of the brand. On the other hand, when affect becomes directly attached to the brand, it is of no further consequence what happens to the affective stimuli that were previously paired with the brand.

Ninety-seven students at a large Southeastern university participated. The design of the study was a mixed 2 (sequential vs. simultaneous conditioning) x 2 (same vs. different pairings) x 3 (attitudes towards normally positively conditioned, positively conditioned with a posteriori devaluated affective stimuli, and neutrally conditioned brands). The first two factors were manipulated between subjects, the latter one within subjects.

In accordance with our theory, we found that a devaluation of the affective stimuli negatively impacts the affect towards the brand in a sequential same pairings condition, in a simultaneous same pairings condition, but not in the simultaneous different pairings condition. As in experiment 1, no affect transfer occurred with a sequential different pairings condition.

Discussion

In an unreported third experiment we also found that attitudes generated by a simultaneous different pairings procedure (leading to direct affect transfer) are much more stable and hence not sensitive to forgetting induced by other learning tasks after conditioning, whereas attitudes generated by a sequential same pairings procedure (leading to indirect affect transfer) are very vulnerable to forgetting of the associations induced by new learning tasks.
It can be concluded that achieving direct transfer of affect carries distinctive advantages for the brand. First, it shields the brand from devaluation of associated affective stimuli (such as celebrity endorsers falling from grace). Second, it’s much more stable with regard to interference by subsequent learning as in advertising clutter situations.

**REFERENCE**