Do Easterners Feel More Discomfort in Response to Positive Information Than Westerners?

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Positive information usually elicits favorable reactions, though cultural differences and varied information processing styles may evoke different reactions to positive information. In particular, Easterners and Westerners may experience varying levels of discomfort in response to positive information. Easterners likely sense greater discomfort and process positive information more systematically and with counterarguments, because they tend to exhibit greater hindsight bias and rely more on relationships. Westerners process positive information to avoid contradiction and achieve categorization, so they likely sense a reinforcement of that information. The findings confirm that Easterners feel more discomfort in the face of positive information and higher motivations to reduce that discomfort than do Westerners. Implications involve the negative effects of positive information in international promotion settings and different receptions of positive information across countries.

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Do people respond favorably when they perceive positive, favorable information? For example, when frequent consumers of caffe lattes read an article that argues caffe latte is the most delicious form of coffee, they should feel reinforced and comforted, because the information is consistent with their own attitudes and preferences. Yet some people may sense less positive feelings due to their information processing method. In particular, these differences likely are greater across cultures, especially between Eastern and Western cultures. People from Eastern cultures tend to use more situational inferences, experiential knowledge, dialectics, and relationships to process information, whereas Westerners rely more on dispositional inferences, logical thinking, a lack of contradiction, and categorization (Choi, Nisbett, and Norenzayan 1999; Nisbett 2003; Nisbett et al. 2001; Norenzayan, Choi, and Nisbett 2002). Thus, Easterners may respond differently than Westerners to the same favorable product or service information, such that Easterners feel less discomfort when confronted with the same information.

Because they display greater hindsight bias than Westerners, Easterners may be more likely to process positive information as inconsistent (Choi and Nisbett 2000). Hindsight bias involves the tendency to overestimate in hindsight what is known in foresight (Choi and Nisbett 2000; Fischhoff 1975). According to previous research (Choi, Dalai, and Kim-Prieto 1999), Asians engage in more complex information processing than do Americans. If Easterners think more deeply about alternative perceptions of an object (e.g., the dark side), positive information may appear more inconsistent. For example, Easterners reading the positive caffe latte story might ponder it further and realize that caffe latte contains more fat and calories, which may help make it the most delicious coffee. Thus, Easterners would display more discomfort than Westerners when they consider the same positive information. In contrast, Westerners likely process the positive information as consistent and focus more specifically on the positive aspects, because they rely on object focusing and categorization processing (Nisbett 2003), which means they do not consider category overlaps (i.e., non-contradiction processing; Nisbett 2003). In turn, Easterners should feel more discomfort than Westerners when they consider the same positive information.

Higher discomfort then may result in greater motivation to reduce the discomfort. That is, Easterners should experience a greater motivation to resolve their discomfort by perhaps ignoring or discarding the information. In contrast, Westerners, with their lower sense of discomfort, likely feel less motivation to resolve what they already perceive as positive and consistent information. Again, Westerners use more focusing and non-contradictory information processing, such that they consider the positive information as nonsituated (Nisbett 2003). Therefore, Easterners should experience more motivation to reduce discomfort than do Westerners for the same positive information.

These varying levels of motivation may in turn affect information processing, especially systematic and counterargument processing. Higher discomfort and motivation should cause Easterners to follow more detailed and counterargument-based processing, because people employ more systematic processing to deal with inconsistent information (Jain and Maheswaran 2000). In contrast, Westerners likely employ less systematic processing and fewer counterarguments to positive information, focusing instead on the presented information (i.e., focal focusing; Nisbett 2003). They believe, “Coffee latte is the best coffee,” and thus, they forego systematic or counterargument-based processing. That is, Easterners should display more systematic and counterargument processing than Westerners with regard to the same positive information.

The tests of these hypotheses include both Koreans and Americans who prefer caffe latte over Espresso; that is, only Koreans and Americans who like caffe latte participated in this study. The studies took place in a metropolitan Korean city and a Midwestern U.S. town with subjects from similar demographic backgrounds (i.e., young college students). The same stimuli appear in both the Korean and U.S. studies. The positive information stimulus reads: “The Health & Culture Center (HCC) at Harvard University reports that caffe latte is delayed reward than maximizers (respectively $\chi^2(1)=2.729$, $p=.099$ and $\chi^2(1)=5.447$, $p<.05$). While results for the other two choice options did not prove to be significant, they showed a similar pattern. This provides partial support for the third hypothesis.

Data concerning the second hypothesis, as well as more support for hypothesis 1 and 3 are being collected. Also, the impact of maximizers’ and satisficers’ choices on experienced regret is being examined. When ‘going for the best’ implies ‘choosing the immediate’, maximizing might be regretful in the long term.

References


most preferred coffee by students. HCC also reports that people evaluate caffe latte as the most polished, mildest, and most delicious coffee.” Subjects responded to several discomfort and motivation to reduce discomfort items on seven-point scales (discomfort: uneasy, uncomfortable, bothered by the information; motivation: discard, ignore, skip over the information). To measure systematic and counterargument processing, the study used open-ended questions that asked the subjects to describe their thoughts about the presented information.

The findings provide strong support for the hypotheses. Korean subjects exhibited much higher levels of discomfort than did the U.S. subjects in response to the same positive caffe latte information (p<.01). Furthermore, the Korean subjects were more motivated to reduce their discomfort than the Americans with the same positive information (p<.05). Finally, the subjects’ remarks and comments matched the hypotheses: Koreans noted more systematic processing and counterarguments than did the Americans.

Thus, as hypothesized, Easterners experience more discomfort and greater motivation to reduce their discomfort than do Westerners when it comes to positive information. These findings suggest that marketers should employ different methods to present positive information in Eastern countries to elicit the most favorable reactions. For examples, claims that “we are the best” may not be well-received in Eastern cultures, because they would elicit higher levels of discomfort and evoke greater motivation to reject the information and create counterarguments.

The Effects of Corporate Commitment and Cause Commercialization in Cause-Related Marketing

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In Cause-Related Marketing (CRM), one of the major Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies, a participating company makes a donation to a charity or cause each time a consumer purchases an item from that company. According to the IEG Sponsorship Report, U.S. corporate spending on CRM was $1.50 billion in 2008—a dramatic increase from $120 million in 1990. CRM has been widely recognized as an effective marketing strategy that enhances corporate image and boosts sales. As today’s consumers become increasingly savvy, consumer responses to CRM may not be uniformly positive, however. Attribution theory suggests that consumers will not evaluate a company’s CRM positively if consumers become suspicious of the motives underlying the activity (Webb and Mohr 1998). When consumers become doubtful and attribute the company’s motive for CRM efforts mostly to its self-serving benefits, CRM becomes ineffective and may even backfire (Yoon, Gurhan-Canli and Schwarz 2006).

A significant factor leading to positive CRM outcomes is a company’s commitment to CSR. Past research suggests that the amount of resources invested by a company in its CRM program, including the duration of the CRM activity, influences consumer perceptions of the company’s overall commitment to a social cause. For example, Varadarajan and Menon (1988) proposed that long- versus short-term CRM campaigns have greater potential to enhance a corporate image. Likewise, advertising campaigns with a social dimension are more likely to be successful when accompanied by a long-term commitment (Drumwright 1996). Other investments, such as monetary donations, employee expertise, and volunteer work, also enhance perceived corporate commitment (Brink et al. 2006).

Another factor that may influence the effectiveness of CRM is the cause’s level of commercialization. As more and more causes have engaged in CRM, there has been growing concern about cause exploitation and over-commercialization (Varadarajan and Menon 1988). As Gurin (1987) noted, for example, companies generally wish to be associated with popular, risk-free, and highly visible causes to maximize their benefits from CRM programs. As a result, less popular, relatively risky, and less visible causes that are often in greater need of support tend to be neglected and receive little corporate support. Further, over-commercialization of a nonprofit organization could endanger the value of the cause and thus erode its appeal to individual supporters (Gurin 1987). Yet this dimension of CRM has been overlooked in previous research on consumer response to various CRM acts and deserves careful research attention.

References