Is There a Universal Positivity Effect? a Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Folkes and Patrick (2003) found that American consumers have positivity effect in service perceptions. This paper investigated a boundary condition and its underlying cognitive process from a cross-cultural perspective: whether and how a different inference mechanism in a collectivist culture, Chinese culture in particular, may influence the service positivity effect.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15767/volumes/v38/NA-38

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Is there a Universal Positivity Effect? A Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Extended Abstract

Literature in the judgment and decision making and consumer behaviour found prevalently that consumers tend to evaluate the negative information to a larger extent than the positive information (“loss aversion”, Kahneman and Tversky 1979; or “negative bias”, Herr, Kardes and Kim 1991). Some researchers argued that such results are found in the product domain because negative information is considered as more diagnostic (Skowronska and Carlson 1989) or permits categorization of a product more easily (Herr et al. 1991). However, when it comes to service perceptions, it is totally different. As indicated in Folkes and Patrick (2003), services are not as homogenous as products are. Instead, consumers have heterogeneous service experience. They also have positive expectation for service provider’s behaviour. Hence, for a novice consumer, negative information about an individual service provider is not diagnostic of the firm and s/he may consider negative individual as an outlier (Herr et al. 1991). Folkes and Patrick (2003) found that American consumers who have little experience with a service tend to have a “positivity effect”, i.e., from positive information about one employee, American consumers infer the firm’s other service providers to be similarly positive to a greater extent than, from negative information, they infer the firm’s other service providers to be similarly negative.

More research is called for to examine the boundaries and the underlying cognitive processes of this positivity effect (Folkes and Patrick 2003). To the best of our knowledge, the literature is still silent on two important assumptions: although it is true that services tend to be more heterogeneous than products in reality, consumers may NOT necessarily perceive (1) that services are heterogeneous and (2) that negative information in such a situation is not diagnostic, even when the other conditions are met (e.g., novice consumer and positive expectation). Therefore, this paper attempts to investigate these issues from a cross-cultural perspective: whether and how a different inference mechanism in a collectivist culture, Chinese culture in particular (i.e., a stronger tendency to infer and generalize from one individual sample to others, including both service experience and members in the same group) (Spencer-Rodgers et al. 2007) may influence the positivity effect.

Study 1: Positivity Effect for Chinese Consumers: Correction of Cultural-Based Judgments?

Spencer-Rodgers et al. (2007) found that Chinese may view diverse groups as more entitative, to attribute more internally consistent dispositions to groups and their members, and to stereotype more readily than do Americans. Thus, in the context of service experience, it is possible that Chinese may be more likely than Americans to not only consider service experience to be more homogeneous (generalization from one service experience), but also infer and generalize behaviours from one individual employee to the other members in the same firm. Consequently, negativity effect, instead of positivity effect, may be the default effect for Chinese consumers. In other words, Chinese consumers are more likely to infer the firm’s other service providers to behave negatively from information that one individual service provider behaved negatively than they are to infer the firm’s other service providers to behave positively from information that one individual service provider behaved positively.

However, the generalization from one individual to the whole group is not a logical and persuasive reasoning, especially when consumers have positive expectation and can make thoughtful deliberation (e.g., negative information about an individual is not diagnostic of the firm and they should consider him/her as an outlier), regardless of their cultural background. Briley and Aaker (2006) found that culture-based judgments can be corrected by personal knowledge (e.g., logical and persuasive internal reasoning), in particular, when processing is thoughtful and more deliberative. Therefore, negativity (positivity) effect may occur when Chinese consumers make initial and automatic (deliberate) reactions to the individual sample.

Study One was a 2 (behaviour valence: positive vs. negative) X 2 (deliberate vs. intuitive thinking) between-subject experiment, in which 101 Chinese consumers participated. We found that Chinese consumers exhibited positivity effects when they were asked to think deliberately. When they were asked to think intuitively, they exhibited a strong negativity effect.

Study 2: Why does culture matter?

Spencer-Rodgers et al. (2007) argued that private interests are expected to be suppressed and personal attributes are to be adjusted for members of collectivist cultures to fit in with the group (Markus & Kitayama 1991; Triandis, 1995). Hence, the cultural difference between Chinese and Americans on the inference from one individual sample to a whole group may be due to different modes of thinking: interdependent (Chinese) vs. independent (Americans) thinking (Kühnen, Hannover and Schubert 2001). Thus, we predict that when Chinese consumers are in a mode of interdependent thinking (about their relationship with others), they may be more likely to consider the individual to be part of the group and thus s/he represents the group’s attributes, which should be the same for other members in the group. However, when Chinese consumers are in a mode of independent thinking, they may be more likely to think that each individual is independent from others and does not represent the group. It has been found that both culture and situational priming may lead to the accessibility of different mode of thinking (Kühnen et al. 2001). Briley and Wyer (2001) found that after a contextual prime (e.g., exposing Chinese people to pictures of American cultural icons) prompting a challenge to the cultural guidance, Chinese people feel no more emotionally connected to important others than American people do. Therefore, we propose that by priming an independent mode of thinking, Chinese consumers may show a positivity effect as Americans, while by priming an interdependent mode of thinking, Chinese consumers may show negativity effect.

Study Two was a 2 (behaviour valence: positive vs. negative) X 2 (mode of thinking: independent vs. interdependent thinking) between-subject experiment, in which 120 Chinese consumers participated. We found that Chinese consumers showed negativity effects when they were primed to think interdependently, while they showed positivity effects when they were primed to think independently.
References


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The Link between Usability, Preference Reversal, and Decision Making

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Whether it’s browsing thousands of digital cameras on eBay or making sense of a myriad number of coffee makers on Amazon.com, it is clear that today’s consumers face large amounts of information. Online retailers have tried many approaches to help consumers deal with increasing amounts of information; including electronic agents that recommend particular products based on consumer preferences or the similarity of their shopping histories to other consumers (Diehl 2005; Häubl and Murray 2003); presenting information in matrix format that allows alternatives and attributes to easily be compared (Häubl and Trifts 2000); and providing tools for sorting, selecting, and filtering alternatives (Todd and Benbasat 1991; 1992; 1999).

Prior research suggests that the navigability of a retail website is a key determinant of the likelihood that browsers turn into buyers, the extent to which they learn to efficiently use the website, and the likelihood they return to the website for future purchases (Johnson, Bellman, and Lohse 2003; Nielsen 1993; Palmer 2002). One widely used approach to improve navigability is to use visual design elements such as visual separators between rows or between columns of data in a product matrix. For example, both Travelocity and Intel display alternatives in columns and attributes in rows on their websites but Travelocity uses vertical lines to separate alternatives while Intel uses horizontal lines to separate attributes. Although each approach may increase consumer understanding of the environment by making navigation easier (Huizingh 2000; Nielsen 1993), it is unclear which is better from a decision-making perspective.

Most assessments of website design involve usability testing, with a focus on user understanding, the extent to which users get lost, and the speed of information retrieval (Huizingh 2000; Nielsen 1993; Palmer 2002). In contrast, research on decision making tends to examine how task aspects of a decision problem, such as the amount of information in a choice set; or context aspects, such as the correlation among product attributes, affect decision processes and outcomes (Bettman, Johnson, Luce, and Payne 1993; Payne, Bettman, and Johnson 1993; Lurie 2004). In general there has been little examination of how design elements, that make no changes to task or context variables, affect consumer preferences and decision making.

In this article, we propose that design elements, such as visual separators, can act as cognitive constraints that systematically affect the acquisition and processing of information with implications for preferences as well as decision processes and choices. To the extent that consumers adapt their decision to the task and context variables in the decision environment (Bettman et al. 1993; Payne, Bettman, and Johnson 1988; Payne et al. 1993), visual separators may discourage these adaptive responses. However, by encouraging the uniform use of particular information acquisition strategies, visual separators should also serve to enhance decision efficiency. To the extent that decision processes have a larger impact on choice quality in environments where consumers need to make tradeoffs among attributes (Bettman et al. 1993; Payne et al. 1988), we expect that visual separators will have the greatest effect on choice quality in such environments.

In a series of studies we examine how design elements such as visual separators affect decision processes and outcomes in different choice contexts. Although a pretest suggests that there is no clear agreement, even among computer science students, on whether it is better to visually separate alternatives or attributes, experimental results show these design elements affect choice quality. These effects, however, depend on the characteristics of the decision context; in particular, the intercorrelation among product attributes.

Study 1 shows that visual separators shift the preference reversal effect between joint and separate evaluations of alternatives found in Hsee (1996) such that visual separators between alternatives increase the difference of willingness to pay for two alternatives while...