The Power of Positive Thinking: Asymmetrical Affective Perseverance in Consumer Brand Judgments

Brent Coker, University of Melbourne

This research explores an effect we call Asymmetric Affective Perseverance, whereby a positive attitude continues to influence brand judgment when replaced by a negative attitude, but negative attitudes do not continue to influence judgment when replaced by a positive attitude under the same conditions.

[to cite]:


[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/16023/volumes/v38/NA-38

[copyright notice]:

This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
The Power of Positive Thinking: Asymmetrical Affective Perseverance in Consumer Brand Judgments
Brent Coker, University of Melbourne, Australia

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers update their attitudes towards brands as new information is encoded. For example, when reading online reviews about hotels or restaurants when booking a holiday, consumers will adjust their attitude in line with the positivity or negativity of the reviews being read. In many situations, the valence of information encoded about a product or service is mixed. It is rare for instance for online hotel reviews to be consistently positive or negative; there are always some patrons who appear to have had a more positive or more negative experience with the hotel than the majority. From a big picture standpoint, the issue of how consumers form attitudes towards products and services from reading online reviews raises the more general issue of how consumers adjust their attitudes when information describing the quality of product or service is mixed. The goal of this research therefore is to explore how consumers update their attitudes towards products and services when information encountered during decision making is of opposite valence.

Conventional wisdom would suggest that if a consumer has a favorable attitude towards a brand, which is then contested by negative information, the consumer will have control over their judgments and adjust their evaluation accordingly. For example, a consumer may hear a rumor about a brand, which they later find to be untrue. Similarly, when a consumer encodes positive information contesting previously encoded negative information, they will also have control over their judgments and adjust their evaluations accordingly. The present research argues however that consumers are less successful at adjusting their attitudes in a positive to negative direction than they are at adjusting their attitudes in a negative to positive direction. Specifically, this research proposes a theory of asymmetric affective perseverance, whereby positive attitudes continue to contaminate judgments towards a brand when replaced by negative attitudes, but negative attitudes do not. This leads to the paradoxical finding that consumers’ attitudes towards a brand are positively skewed if they encode positive information before negative information, than if they encode the same information in the opposite order.

This research further finds that this asymmetrical perseverance of affect is contingent on trend of information over time, and that it only occurs when information is deeply encoded. When trend information is available, such as when positive reviews are old, and negative reviews are recent, the pattern of results is reversed, and the nature of asymmetric affective perseverance is muted.

The phenomenon of asymmetric affective perseverance is attributed to people’s relative difficulty in shifting their attitude in a positive to negative direction, than in a negative to positive direction. Anecdotaly, the concept of denial in psychiatric literature describes a similar cognitive process. A person given bad news will often experience the protection mechanism of disbelief, deferral, and dismissal before a relatively negative affective state sinks in (Lubinsky 1994). In contrast, the shift from relative despair to happiness is often instantaneous, and has a stronger effect on imagined outcomes than negative factors. In general, human beings prefer to remain optimistic and are more willing and hopeful towards adopting a positive outlook than remaining in a relative state of negativity. The asymmetry in attitude adjustment pertaining to brands is demonstrated in two studies comprised of four experiments.

The first study demonstrates asymmetric perseverance of positive affect in two hypothetical brand evaluation exercises. Experiment one documents the existence of positive contamination when a positive attitude is replaced by a negative attitude, with an absence of negative contamination when the attitude replacement is from negative to positive. Experiment two further documents asymmetrical attitude replacement, finding the same effect when attempts by participants to adjust attitudes to a relative state of ambivalence are unsuccessful after participants are told the positive information that shaped their attitude was false.

The second study investigates the mechanisms underlying asymmetric affective perseverance. Specifically, experiment 3 further tests the theory by demonstrating how asymmetric perseverance of affect is contingent on time trend information. In a simulated task of evaluation based on online reviews, it is assumed that a consumer should be more forgiving of a brand if negative reviews are relatively old, and have been replaced by more recent positive reviews. This pattern should suggest improvement, and therefore less likelihood of regret. The results suggest attenuation of positive contamination when trend information is available. Finally, experiment four lends support to the theory by showing that asymmetrical affective perseverance appears to be a function of cognitive elaboration.

From a big picture standpoint, our theory is interesting because it sheds light on how consumers form attitudes towards brands, when influenced by oppositely valenced information. Our theory is also interesting because it explains inconsistent findings in psychology literature about attitude replacement, which is also relevant to how consumers form brand judgments. Although some research has found that people are successful at discounting previously formed judgments (Golding et al. 1990), other research has found that invalidated information may continue to contaminate future judgments, without the subject being aware (Bekerian and Bowers 1983; Greenwald and Banaji 1995; Lindsay and Johnson 1989).