Although dialectical thinking has been associated with modesty in consumer responses, we demonstrate that high (vs. low) dialectical thinking is associated with more extreme attitudes when these attitudes follow from processing contradictory information. This is because high dialectical thinkers process contradictory information fluently and have confidence in their own judgments.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Current social media facilitate communications among consumers, and such conversations often involve product evaluations, leading to recommendations to adopt or to avoid certain options. However, it is unlikely that product reviews or recommendations provided by numerous others will be unanimously positive or unanimously negative. When considering contradictory reviews, can consumers accept that it is both of the best yet also the worst quality at the same time? How will such conflicting information be integrated and reflected in subsequent attitudes towards the movie? This research aims to answer these questions.

Research on dialectical thinking has found differences in the degree to which consumers are comfortable with ambiguity or holding contradictory beliefs. Peng and Nisbett (1999) showed that high dialectical thinkers (Chinese people) tend to endorse both sides of an argument that low dialectical thinkers (North Americans) perceive to be contradictory and hence incompatible. Similarly, we expect that responses to contradictory information may depend on consumers’ propensity to accept and resolve contradiction; namely, their level of dialectical thinking. More importantly, research suggests that relative to their low dialectical counterparts, high dialectical thinkers generally avoid the adoption of extreme positions (Choi and Choi 2002). However, we predict a more counterintuitive impact of dialectical thinking on consumer attitudes when these are based on contradictory information. We propose that high (vs. low) dialectical thinkers process contradictory information more fluently, and that this greater processing fluency in turn will boost their judgmental confidence, resulting in relatively greater attitude extremity.

High (vs. low) dialectical thinkers process contradiction with greater ease (Peng and Nisbett 1999). Research on processing fluency (Janiszewski and Meyvis 2001; Lee and Labroo 2004; Novemsky et al. 2007) suggests that attitudes toward a stimulus are more favorable when it is more easily processed. Importantly for our theorizing, greater processing ease or fluency is associated with greater judgmental confidence (Tsai and McGill 2011), which refers to consumers’ impression of the quality of their judgments. Confidence is subject to change during the processing of sequential information. In particular, when forming impressions of an object based on an initial piece of information that is subsequently disconfirmed by a second, contradictory piece of information, judgmental confidence will be undermined (Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991). A question that arises is how this greater confidence will be reflected in subsequent attitudes. Since greater ease of processing contradictions may make high dialectical thinkers feel assured with respect to the quality of their judgments, we predict that greater levels of judgmental confidence will decrease the tendency of evaluating options modestly, and hence increase attitude extremity.

Thus, we argue that high dialectical thinkers infer that, given that an object is easy to evaluate, they must either like it or dislike it intensively. That is, high dialectical thinkers exhibit greater judgmental confidence and become more extreme in their attitudes. Based on this, we propose that high (vs. low) dialectical thinkers are more likely to evaluate options extremely in contexts of contradictory information, and the effect of dialectical thinking on evaluations should be driven by confidence.

We conducted a series of experiments that collectively provide support for our theory concerning the relationships among consumers’ propensity to engage in dialectical thinking, confidence, and subsequent attitudes. The first study tests our first proposition and demonstrates that high (vs. low) dialectical thinking result in more extreme attitudes in the presence of contradictory information, but – consistent with prior literature – in more modest attitudes based on non-contradictory information. A follow-up study manipulates (rather than measures) dialectical thinking and again finds high dialectical thinking associated with more extreme judgments based on contradictory information. Study 2 extends these findings by showing that confidence drives the effect of dialectical thinking on attitude extremity. Consistent with our proposition that individuals draw on confidence inferred from processing fluency in their attitude construction, study 3 evinces that dialectical thinking no longer impacts attitude extremity for those less likely to rely on these inferences; namely, those high in product knowledge.

This work makes three theoretical contributions. First, we show that presence (vs. absence) of contradiction moderates the effect of dialectical thinking on attitudes. Second, we evince that high (vs. low) dialectical thinkers respond more extremely to contradiction because they are able to process contradictory information more fluently, giving them relatively greater judgmental confidence. Third, we demonstrate that attitude extremity differs based on the degree of processing fluency. Although past research has shown that processing fluency leads to greater liking (Janiszewski and Meyvis 2001; Lee and Labroo 2004; Novemsky et al. 2007), our result suggests that when an object becomes easier to evaluate, attitudes change not only in valence but also in intensity, such that consumers become more extreme in their liking or in their disliking.

REFERENCES