(The Lack Of) Processing Fluency and Attitude Enhancement

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This paper reports three studies demonstrating a reversal of the usual traditional fluency effects as the attitude towards the less fluent stimulus increases significantly more than that towards the more fluent stimulus. We show that the phenomenon is based on the misattribution of the fluency experience to the decision making process.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research has consistently found that stimuli with higher processing fluency are better liked. This paper reports three studies which show that a time delay of only a few minutes and a misattribution prime makes subjects attribute the experience of ease or difficulty to the decision making process, which results in a reversal of the traditional fluency effect. Studies 1 and 2 show that the attitudes toward less-fluent-difficult-to-read stimuli increased significantly after subjects were made to mis-attribute the efforts spent in processing the stimuli to the decision making task. The third study investigates the underlying phenomenon by manipulating the source to which subjects attribute the experience of fluency.

We suggest that, in a decision making scenario, the experience of processing ease can be attributed either to the features of the object or to the effort spent in making a decision. The former results in the traditional fluency effect while the latter influences the preference for the results of the decision. We show that, due to this process, the difficulty experienced in reading the attributes of the products in a “hard to read” font, results in an increase in the attitude ratings towards the chosen product. We conduct studies where subjects need to make a choice between two fluent options, between two disfluent options or between two options that are significantly different in processing fluency. With the help of these studies we show that the attitude towards the less fluent stimulus increases significantly after the attribution is made. In our third study we verify our ‘attribution’ based rationale for this phenomenon.

When subjects have to choose between multiple stimuli that are all low in fluency, they will need to expend more time and effort on the task. The spent effort can be misattributed to the decision making process. Their attitude towards the chosen option should increase significantly after such a misattribution because people value decisions for which they have expended a great deal of effort. Conversely, a similar increase in attitude should not be observed when subjects need to choose between multiple fluent (easy to read) stimuli. In this case, subjects will spend less time and effort on the choice task because subjects will find it easy to read and process the stimuli. Thus, the increase in attitude towards the stimuli after the misattribution should be significantly higher in the less-fluent-stimuli choice task scenario than in the more-fluent-stimuli choice task scenario.

Study 1 was a mixed factor design. A participant either made a choice between two highly fluent stimuli or two less fluent stimuli. The attitude towards the stimuli were measured both before and after the misattribution prime. The change in attitude was analyzed as the dependent variable. The results confirmed our prediction. The usual pattern of high fluency being associated with greater liking was replicated in the measures taken before the buffer task and choice task (-.669 vs 2.10; F(1, 104)=55.50; p<.001). However, after the buffer task, the attitudes increased significantly in the low fluency condition when compared to the high fluency condition (Attitude change=2.053 vs .056; F(1, 104)=30.225; p<.001).

We hypothesized that similar results will be seen if fluency of stimuli is manipulated as a within subject factor using both low fluency and high fluency options in the same choice set. As shown in previous literature, before the misattribution task, the attitude towards the highly fluent stimulus will be higher than the less fluent stimulus. There will be less time taken to make a decision because the participants will choose the high fluency option over the low fluency option due to the positive affect caused by fluency. However, when the ease experienced is attributed to the decision making process, the attitude will decrease towards the highly fluent stimulus and will increase towards the less fluent stimulus.

Study 2 was a within subject design. Each participant was shown one high fluency stimulus and one low fluency stimulus. The attitude towards the stimuli were measured before and after the misattribution prime. Results showed that the attitude increase towards the less fluent stimuli was significantly more than the attitude increase towards the more fluent stimuli (.493 vs -.282; F(1, 69)=6.245; p<.05). Moreover, the attitude towards the less fluent stimuli increased significantly (p < .05). In fact, the attitude towards the highly fluent stimulus marginally decreased after the time delay as per the hypothesis H2a (p= 0.118).

We predict that we can remove the effect if the individual does not attribute the experience of ease (or difficulty) to the decision making process if, after the time delay, it is made salient to the individual that the effort was due to the readability of the font. Hence, the result mentioned above should be reduced when subjects do not consider the role of the decision making process in the experience of fluency.

Study 3 was a mixed factor design. All participants were shown two stimuli in a less fluent font. The attitude towards the stimuli for each participant were measured before and after the misattribution prime. Half the participants were made to misattribute the fluency experience to the decision making process and the other half of the participants were made to attribute the fluency to the readability of the stimuli. The results confirmed that the increase in attitude after the time delay in the ‘readability’ condition was significantly less than what it was in the ‘difficulty-in-decision-making’ condition (.799 vs. 1.869; F(1, 81)=5.537; p <.05). Note that we had predicted that the attribution of experienced fluency to the decision making process is a cause for the change in attitudes towards the products. Study 3 validates this rationale.

In summary, we demonstrate in three studies that, in a decision making domain, the attitude towards the less fluent stimuli increases after the fluency experience is misattributed to the decision making process. We have shown that the increase in attitude favorability towards the less fluent stimuli is significantly more than that towards the more fluent stimuli. This result is shown in the scenario where subjects decide between a high fluent stimulus and a low fluent stimulus as well.