Please Do Interrupt, But Nicely! the Effect of Positive and Negative Interruptions on Product Evaluation and Choice

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This research studies the affective consequences of interruptions on evaluation and choice. Six studies demonstrate that positive (negative) interruptions lead to unfavourable (favourable) evaluation and lower (higher) choice of pre-interruption products; but favourable (unfavourable) evaluation and higher (lower) choice of post-interruption products. Relevant mediation and moderation effects are also found.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Interruptions have become pervasive in our lives (Carrier et al. 2009). Extant research has only looked at the cognitive dimensions (timings, duration and cognitive demand), but not at the affective dimensions of interruptions, which is a lacuna because no interruption is devoid of affective undertones (An interruption from a tele-marketer selling offers induces a different affective response than a call from an old friend). Thus, understanding the impact of interruptions with positive and negative affective consequences on focal tasks can provide rich theoretical and practical insights. This research explores the impact of valenced interruptions on product evaluation and choice. It is found that valenced interruptions lead to stronger contrast in evaluation of otherwise similar products. Five studies demonstrate that positive (negative) interruptions lead to unfavourable (favourable) evaluation and lower (higher) choice of pre-interruption products; but favourable (unfavourable) evaluation and higher (lower) choice of post-interruption products.

We argue that interruptions carry some content, which is subject to meaning-making by the receiver (Weick 1995). Such meanings are mostly affect laden and can induce spontaneous positive and negative emotional responses (Berkowitz 1993; Han, Lerner, and Keltner 2007). Moreover, it is known that positive (negative) affect leads to abstract (concrete) construal (Isbell, Burns, and Haar 2005; Labroo and Patrick 2009). Finally, research shows that concrete (abstract) construal leads to focus on costs and ‘cons’ (rewards and ‘pros’) of a product (Vallacher and Wegner 1989; Eyal et al. 2004). Therefore, we hypothesize that positive (negative) interruption leads to favourable (unfavourable) evaluation of post-interruption product, through mediation of construal. Given that choice happens in a finite consideration-set (Nedungadi 1987), interruption may occur such that some products are evaluated before (pre-interruption) while some are evaluated after the interruption (post-interruption). Since the product evaluation is relative, favourable (unfavourable) evaluation of post-interruption product should relatively skew evaluation of other product, leading to unfavourable (favourable) evaluation of pre-interruption product. Lastly, we also consider the moderation of brand strength on the above proposed effect.

In Study 1, participants (N=132) were randomly allocated to one of the four conditions (positive/negative/neutral/no interruption). Two product profiles (pretested for equivalence on evaluation) were shown sequentially and an interruption (a buffering circle) was placed after the first product profile. Experimenter apologized for this interruption, and showed a video (positive/negative: pretested for valence; no video: neutral-interruption; no buffering: no-interruption condition). Product video resumed after the interruption, followed by choice/evaluation responses. Significantly larger (smaller) proportion of participants chose post-interruption product after positive (negative) interruption ($\chi^2(1)=6.143, p=.013$). A $4 \times 2$ ANOVA repeated measures revealed a significant interaction effect ($F(3,127)=7.901, p<.001$). Planned contrasts revealed that for positive/negative interruption, post(pre-) interruption product was evaluated favourably than pre(post-) interruption product ($M_{positive\ interruption}=3.97, M_{negative\ interruption}=6.70, t(127)=5.06, p<.001; M_{pre-interruption}=5.26, M_{post-interruption}=4.51, t(127)=1.30, p=.096$). There was no significant difference in evaluation and choice in neutral/no interruption conditions. However, the means in negative and neutral interruption condition were not statistically different, indicating that similar negative meaning is attached to neutral interruption. These results provide initial support to our hypotheses.

If the effects are only due to the valence of interruption, similar results should be expected for valenced breaks (equivalent in affective content but are planned and consciously taken while interruptions are random and sudden). This is theoretically important as no previous research has contrasted interruptions with breaks. In Study 2, participants (N=136) were randomly allocated to: 2 (interference:break/interruption) x 2 (valence:positive/negative) conditions. The design was similar to study 1, but participants in break conditions were told in advance about the video and two different product profiles (pretested for equivalence) were used for evaluation. Results consistent with Study 1 were found for valenced interruptions ($M_{pre-interruption}=5.66, M_{post-interruption}=4.25, t(132)=3.30, p<.001$), but no significant effects were found for valenced breaks. Thus, the effects of interruptions are due to both the valenced content and the unexpected, random nature.

Study 3 explored the underlying process. Participants (N=208) were allocated randomly to: 2 (intervention:break/interruption) x 2 (valence:positive/ negative) conditions. The design was similar to study 2, except that products were combined from study 1 and 2 (counterbalanced) for evaluation exercise. Affect and construal were measured by PANAS and BIF scale (Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988; Vallacher, and Wegner 1989). Results for evaluation were consistent with first two studies. A mediation analysis (Hayes, 2013; Model 4) supported the mediation of construal between interruption and evaluation (95% CI for indirect effect:0.0110 to 0.4287). No such mediation was found for valenced breaks. Affect scores were significantly different in interruption, but not in break conditions.

So far, responses were provided in the end of product sequence, and we argued that better (worse) evaluation of post-interruption product influenced evaluation of pre-interruption product. Study 4 provides additional support for this relative evaluation argument. Participants (N=143) were allocated to: 2 (interruption:positive/negative) x 2 (responses:after-each-product/in-the-end) conditions. The design was similar to study 3, except that interruption was presented as sharing of missed information (positive/negative; pre-tested) about the study; and participants provided ratings after each product in simultaneous evaluation. Results consistent with prior studies (study 1-3) were replicated for ‘in-the-end’ evaluation, but only post-interruption evaluation results were replicated for simultaneous evaluation. As expected under relative evaluation argument, ratings of pre-interruption products in negative interruption were higher (lower) in case of in-the-end (simultaneous) evaluation ($p<.001$). Such statistically significant difference was not found in positive interruption condition.

The products in previous studies were unbranded. Study 5 explored the moderating effect of brand strength. Participants (N=118) were allocated randomly to: 2 (interruption:positive/negative) x 2 (brands evaluated:strong/weak; pre-tested) conditions. The design was similar to study 4, except that strong/weak brands were shown in evaluation exercise. Results were consistent with prior studies for...
weak brands, but not for strong brands. This is consistent with prior research that strong brands are less affected by momentary stimuli and rely on prior memory structures (Hoeffler and Keller 2003), while weak brands are vulnerable to influence of momentary stimuli (like interruptions).

This research is among the first to study the affective consequences of interruptions, and to contrast interruptions with breaks. We hope that this work provides direction for more nuanced research and richer understanding of interruptions.

REFERENCES


