Changing Brand Attitudes Using Relevant Affective Cues: an Investigation of Relational Processing in Evaluative Conditioning

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We show that evaluative conditioning depends on the plausibility of relations between the conditioned stimulus (CS) and unconditioned stimulus (US). Implicit attitudes toward CSs are changed much more by pairings with plausible USs than with implausible ones. This finding supports the view that evaluative conditioning involves higher-order relational processing.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Evaluative conditioning (EC) refers to a change of evaluations toward a conditioned stimulus (CS) due to its repeated pairings with an unconditioned stimulus (US). In marketing research and practices, EC has elicited great interests because it can serve as an effective approach to changing consumer preferences. For example, pairing a brand with celebrity endorsers or pleasant images can build consumers’ positive attitudes toward the brand (Gibson 2008; Kim, Allen, and Kardes 1996; Sweldens, Van Osselaer, and Janiszewski 2010). Pairing unhealthy products with disgusting images can reduce consumers’ choice of those products (Hollands, Prestwich, and Marteau 2011; Shaw et al. 2016). Despite the rich demonstration of EC effects in both the psychology and marketing literatures, there are still questions regarding the mental processes responsible for EC (Hofmann et al. 2010). One dominant account is a simple associative process, according to which EC effects result from automatic formation of associative links between the CS and the US or between the CS and the feeling elicited by the US. As a result, the CS acquires a similar evaluation as the US. In contrast, some recent studies suggest that the mechanism for EC may be more complicated than an associative process because experimentally provided information about the relation between CSS and USs can influence EC (Hu, Gawronski, and Balas 2017; Zanon et al. 2014). This suggests that if the CSS and USs have a plausible conceptual relation (e.g., “CS causes US”), EC effects should be more pronounced in implicit attitudes toward the CS, compared to when such relations are absent. We compare the impact of USs matched in valence and intensity but varying in relational plausibility to the CS. On the associational view, EC effects should be similar irrespective of relational plausibility, but the relational view predicts that EC effects will be substantially stronger when the US has a plausible relation with the CS.

In study 1, we used a 3 (USs: plausible, implausible, control) × 2 (product type: sweet foods, liquors) between-subject design. The evaluation targets were novel, fictitious brands of sweet foods or liquors. CSSs were images showing brand logos with products offered by the brands. In the EC procedure, CSSs were paired with either obesity, car accident, or blank (control) images. Obesity (car accident) images were plausible USs for sweet foods (liquors). The two types of USs were pretested as equivalent in their negativity. We measured implicit attitudes toward the brand using the affective misattribution procedure (AMP) and the brief implicit association test (BIAT). We used USs, product type and their interactions to predict implicit attitudes toward the brands. The results on both AMP and BIAT were more consistent with the relational (versus associational) model: implicit attitudes toward the brand were significantly lower for the plausible than implausible US group or the control group. There was no significant difference between the implausible US group and the control group in their implicit attitudes toward the brand. Product type did not moderate these results. Thus, the results of study 1 indicate that EC effects occur only when the USs have plausible relations with the CSSs.

In study 2, we aimed to replicate study 1 while seeking conditions where the classic EC effect, which reflects the associational view, would occur. We found that the classic EC effect occurred when evaluation targets were more perceptually ambiguous (e.g., when brand logos consisted only of abstract images). In this case, implicit attitudes toward the brands were lowered to a similar extent by both plausible and implausible negative USs. But when people’s initial perceptions toward the CS were relatively clear (e.g., when brand logos included concrete product images), implicit attitudes were significantly influenced only by the plausible USs, thus replicating the results in study 1.

Overall, the above findings indicate that EC may involve both associational and relational processes, and one process can dominate over the other depending on people’s initial perceptions toward the CS. When the initial perceptions are not clear, the implicit attitudes toward the CS would be mainly influenced through the associational process. When the initial perceptions are relatively clear, the implicit attitudes toward the CS would be changed primarily through the relational process. For marketing practices, our findings suggest that when consumers have little knowledge toward a brand (e.g., foreign brands, newly launched brands), EC can effectively shape consumers’ implicit attitudes toward the brand irrespective of the conceptual relations between the brand and the USs employed in advertising messages. But in some cases, consumers may already have some knowledge toward a brand (e.g., local brands, existing brands), and they know what types of products the brand offers. In those cases, it would be more effective to use conceptually relevant USs to change consumers’ implicit attitudes toward the brand.

REFERENCES


