“When Knowing Is Better Than Expecting”: Resolving Different Types of Ambivalence By (Biased) Information Processing and Spreading Word-Of-Mouth

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Distinguishing between manifest and univalent ambivalence (i.e., knowing vs. expecting conflicting information), we show that for a same ambivalence level, aversion is higher for manifest than univalent ambivalence. This seems to lead manifest ambivalent individuals to engage in biased (negative) information processing and negative word-of-mouth to effectively reduce their ambivalence.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1009199/volumes/v39/NA-39

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
When consumers simultaneously evaluate an attitude object as positive and negative, they are said to experience attitudinal ambivalence (Kaplan 1972). As ambivalence is generally experienced as aversive and unpleasant (Newby-Clark et al. 2002; Nordgren et al. 2006; van Harreveld et al. 2009a), it is assumed to induce ambivalent people to thoroughly scrutinize any information that enables them to resolve their ambivalence (Jonas et al., 1997; Nordgren et al. 2006; van Harreveld et al. 2009b). However, ambivalence can also be resolved through biased information processing (Nordgren et al. 2006; van Harreveld et al. 2009b). Clark et al. (2008), for example, found that ambivalent individuals increase processing of proattitudinal information and avoid processing of counterattitudinal information. The direction of the bias is thus in line with the initial valence of the attitude (Nordgren et al. 2006; van Harreveld et al. 2009b).

This paper builds on and refines these findings in two major ways. First, we distinguish between two different types of subjective ambivalence: manifest ambivalence (knowing conflicting information) versus univalent ambivalence (expecting conflicting information). Second, next to information processing, we also investigate word-of-mouth (WOM) as a potential coping mechanism. The objective of this paper is then to investigate different types of subjective ambivalence, and information processing and spreading WOM as ways to deal with this ambivalence.

In Study 1, we manipulated univalence, univalent ambivalence, and manifest ambivalence by varying the amount of positive and negative features respondents received about an MP3-player (cf. Priester et al. 2007), and by varying the opinion of one’s best friend. Ambivalence was measured by capturing the degree to which respondents’ reactions toward this MP3-player are conflicted, mixed, and indecisive. The extent of information processing was measured by means of a thought-listing procedure (cf. Nordgren et al. 2006). Thoughts were coded on valence and total number of arguments listed. Results show that manifest and univalent ambivalent individuals experience the same level of subjective ambivalence and generate the same number of thoughts, but the valence of their thoughts significantly differs. Univalent respondents seem to focus more on positive thoughts than univalent ambivalent respondents who in turn generate more positive thoughts compared to manifest ambivalent individuals. Hence, the type of ambivalence induces a different information processing.

Study 2 addresses whether people in the univalent ambivalent condition attempt and/or succeed in resolving their ambivalence through generating especially positive thoughts and individuals in the manifest ambivalent condition through mainly negative thoughts. This study is similar to Study 1, except for two modifications. First, we now also measured ambivalence aversion (by means of the items irritation, frustration and discontentment, cf. Nordgren et al. 2006). Second, a repeated measure of subjective ambivalence was obtained at the end of the questionnaire. Study 2 replicates the findings of Study 1. In addition, manifest ambivalent respondents report more intense negative emotions than participants in the univalent ambivalent and univalent condition. This higher ambivalence aversion seems to motivate manifest ambivalent consumers to process information that can resolve their conflict. Results confirm that for manifest ambivalent respondents the biased (negative) information processing helps to reduce the discomfort of ambivalence. That is, ratings of subsequent ambivalence were lower than ratings of initial ambivalence. For univalent and univalent ambivalent people, there was no difference between initial and subsequent ambivalence.

WOM has been shown to be one of the most employed strategies for reducing cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). By spreading WOM to others, consumers try to convince themselves of their opinion by convincing others of the same opinion. Therefore, we believe that WOM can also be an effective coping mechanism to reduce subjective ambivalence. To the best of our knowledge, this has only been discussed in the cognitive dissonance literature (e.g. Festinger, 1957) and the service literature (e.g. von Wangenheim, 2005) to cope with evaluative incongruence, but has not yet been investigated in relation with ambivalence.

Study 3 was similar to Study 1 except for one modification. Measures of positive and negative WOM replaced the thought-listing task. Positive WOM captured the degree to which respondents would recommend/tell others to buy the MP3-player whereas negative WOM covered the extent to which respondents would warn/tell others not to buy it. Results indicate that, although they experience the same extent of ambivalence, manifest ambivalent people spread more negative and less positive WOM than univalent ambivalent and univalent people. This could be due to the awareness of these conflicting (negative) features and/or to the fact that negative features weigh more heavily in the evaluation of an attitude object than positive ones (Ito et al., 1998).

Study 4 investigates whether spreading negative WOM could also account as an effective coping mechanism to resolve the agony of ambivalence for manifest ambivalent individuals. Study 4 was similar to Study 2, except for one modification. That is, instead of a thought-listing task, WOM was assessed using an open-ended question, the answers of which were coded for valence and number of arguments. This study replicated the effects found in Study 3. That is, manifest ambivalent people spread more negative and less positive WOM compared to univalent ambivalent individuals as well as univalent attitude holders. Similar to Study 2, we show that manifest ambivalence is experienced as more aversive than univalent ambivalence and univalence. In addition, manifest ambivalent attitude holders generate more negative WOM (motivated by the aversion) which reduced their feelings of ambivalence.

Taken together, our findings show the relevance of distinguishing between the types of ambivalence (univalent versus manifest ambivalence). They also shed light on the difference of the underlying structure of feelings of ambivalence and how people cope with these different types of ambivalence in terms of information processing and WOM as a means to reduce the aversion caused by the type of ambivalence. It seems that both biased (negative) information processing and negative WOM helps manifest ambivalent people to resolve their subjective ambivalence level. A possible explanation for this finding may reside in the fact that manifest ambivalence is experienced as more aversive compared to univalent ambivalence.
REFERENCES


