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Research Article

The moderating role of dialecticism in consumer responses to product information☆

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Abstract

We show that consumers high in dialecticism—the tolerance of contradictions and the expectations of change (Peng & Nisbett, 1999)—respond differently than low-dialecticism consumers to messages that have purely positive, mixed, or purely negative information. We find first that for low dialectics, felt ambivalence—and discomfort—is greater for mixed information messages than for negative or positive information. For high dialectics, however, mixed information leads to high felt ambivalence, but not to high discomfort. When given univalent positive or negative information messages, high dialectics have more thoughts about information opposite in valence to that presented, when presented with negative information messages. As a result, for high dialectics, univalent negative information produces the same high felt ambivalence, and even greater discomfort, than do mixed information messages. Through these non-parallel effects, we show that the relationship between felt ambivalence and discomfort is itself moderated by dialecticism. Through three experiments and using a novel manipulation of dialecticism, we replicate and generalize these effects and provide process evidence.

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Introduction

While many research studies have examined the impact on consumer information processing of regulatory focus and self-construal (e.g., Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000), few have investigated the effects of a more “dialectical” processing style. As Wyer and Hong (2010, p.631) point out, although dialectical processing style is well researched in the cross-cultural literature (East Asians typically being higher on dialecticism than North Americans: Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001; Peng & Nisbett, 1999), its role in consumer information processing has not been examined in depth. Dialecticism is a style of information processing that focuses on tolerance of contradictory information, as well as expectations that the environment will continually change (Nisbett et al., 2001; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Since dialecticism concerns the expectations of contradictions in everyday life, it ought to be especially useful in understanding how consumers react to product messages that contain mixed-valence information, such as that becoming more influential today through social media and online reviews (e.g., Amazon.com).

Since our focus here is on responses to product-related messages that contain both, or only, negative and positive information, it is natural that we examine the effect of these

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messages on *attitude ambivalence*, on which there is an extensive prior literature.[2] Ambivalent attitudes are attitudes that contain independent elements of both positivity and negativity, rather than overall unidimensional evaluations (Kaplan, 1972; Priester & Petty, 1996, 2001). We also study the effects on downstream *discomfort.* We contribute to the literature by showing for the first time that while higher dialecticism consumers ("high dialectics") have the same strong degree of attitudinal ambivalence to mixed and univalent negative, but not positive, product information, low dialectics feel more ambivalence to mixed information than to either univalent (positive or negative) messages. Second, we show a very important asymmetry in the effects of univalent positive-only versus negative-only messages. For high dialectics, but not low, negative messages evoke more ambivalence than positive ones. This finding is new, and our theoretical development provides a rationale for why this asymmetry should arise. We make a third contribution by showing that the number of self-generated cognitive "anticipated conflicting responses" (Priester, Petty, & Park, 2007) underlies these differences in ambivalence.

If consumers feel ambivalent about an attitude object, it seems logical that they might also feel a sense of *discomfort*, and some prior research has shown this effect (e.g., van Harreveld, van der Pligt, & Yael, 2009), even equating felt ambivalence with consequent tension and discomfort (e.g., Harmon-Jones, 2000; Priester et al., 2007). We make a fourth contribution by showing that the relationship between attitude ambivalence and discomfort is itself moderated by dialecticism. Though low dialectics show parallel effects across felt ambivalence and discomfort, high dialectics do not. Thus, felt ambivalence and discomfort are two distinct outcomes. We show these effects in a series of experiments that use multiple complementary operationalizations.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Dialecticism

As a universal philosophy focusing on how to deal with contradictions in life (Nisbett et al., 2001; Peng & Nisbett, 1999), dialecticism is characterized by two elements. The first is the belief that the world (reality) is *constantly changing*, so that oppositions and paradoxes are continuously being created. Thus the two sides of an apparent contradiction exist in active harmony: bad becomes good, hate becomes love, and virtue becomes evil. Therefore—the second key element—in this changing world, those high in dialecticism believe that *contradictions can be regarded as natural*, to be accepted and tolerated (Peng & Nisbett, 1999; Spencer-Rodgers, Peng, & Wang, 2010). By accepting contradictions, more-dialectical people seek the middle "way" between extreme propositions. Less-dialectical people tend to pursue a single truth and have a preference for consistency.

We note here that dialecticism has been shown to be different from constructs such as collectivism/individualism (Triandis, 1995), interdependent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and preference for consistency (Cialdini, Trost, & Newsom, 1995). It should also be clearly noted that while dialecticism has been established as a thinking style, this does not mean that high dialectics process information in a more heuristic, top-down manner (versus more systematically). On the contrary, research has shown that high dialectics often search for and use more information, in forming judgments, than low dialectics (e.g., Choi, Dalal, Kim-Prieto, & Park, 2003; Monga & John, 2008). High dialectics are also more likely to ascribe causality to situational factors and to multiple actors; low dialectics hold individual actors responsible.

Given its importance, dialecticism has been studied in social psychology for many years, e.g., in the literatures on self-esteem (Spencer-Rodgers, Peng, Wang, & Hou, 2004), cross-cultural psychology (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010), and emotional experience (Miyamoto, Uchida, & Ellsworth, 2010). However, its use is very limited in consumer research. Mick and Fournier (1998) described consumers' responses to new technology as dialectical, both "a blessing and a curse," but did not measure this construct. A partial conceptualization of dialecticism, the propensity to accept duality, was operationalized by Williams and Aaker (2002), but only through cultural background (Anglo or Asian American) and age. This has obvious limitations because it potentially confounds the across-culture difference in duality with other un-controlled differences (Aaker & Sengupta, 2000, p.70, footnote 3; Williams & Aaker, 2002, p. 645).

Attitudinal ambivalence

Many topics in life evoke evaluative reactions that are simultaneously both positive and negative, and thus conflicting (e.g., toward immigration or nuclear energy). We adopt the terminology of Spencer-Rodgers et al. (2004) to define ambivalent attitudes as those that simultaneously contain evaluations of both positive and negative valence (the coexistence of evaluative opposites). This requires the simultaneous accessibility of both the positive and negative components of attitude (Newby-Clark, McGregor, & Zanna, 2002).

Previous researchers have conceptualized and measured attitudinal ambivalence in two different ways (Priester & Petty, 1996). *Objective* (*or intrinsic*) *ambivalence* concerns the extent to which the inherent characteristics of the message are capable of evoking separate positive and negative evaluations (e.g., Sengupta & Johar, 2002, p. 46; Williams & Aaker, 2002, p. 640). Thus, measures of objective ambivalence assess the positive and negative assessments of the attitude object's properties *separately* and then combine them, using mathematical models (Kaplan, 1972; Priester & Petty, 1996; see Appendix). Since objective ambivalence refers to characteristics of the message itself, not experienced feelings, it is relatively unaffected by situational/contextual factors—including the degree to which

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[2] Note that we do not study effects on attitude valence, because messages containing positive vs. mixed vs. negative information about a product will lead to obvious and uninteresting effects on attitudes toward the product: positive information should naturally yield the most positive attitudes and negative the least. We do however report these data in the methodological appendix, for completeness.

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