

Research Article

The effect of dialectical thinking on the integration of contradictory information

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Abstract

Although lower dialectical thinking has been associated with greater extremity in consumer responses to univalent information, we demonstrate that low, as compared to high, dialectical thinkers express more moderate attitudes when they result from processing contradictory information. Specifically, our studies find that contradictory product information is less fluently processed by consumers low (vs. high) in dialectical thinking, which reduces their judgmental confidence and, in turn, generates more moderate attitudes. We contribute to the literature by showing that in contexts of contradictory information integration, current theory regarding the consequences of dialectical thinking needs to be extended to include not only an attenuation of the extremity effect prior research has found, but a complete reversal. Our results further imply that processing fluency not only impacts attitude valence but, more generally, attitude extremity.

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Current social media greatly facilitate communications among consumers, and such conversations often involve product evaluations, leading to recommendations to adopt or to avoid certain options. However, it is unlikely that product reviews or recommendations provided by numerous others will be unanimously positive or unanimously negative. For example, reviews posted for movies usually range from “this is one of the year’s best movies” to “the only good thing about this movie was the end credits.” When considering a movie with such contradictory reviews, can consumers accept that it is both of the best yet also the worst quality at the same time? And how will such incongruous, conflicting information be integrated and reflected in subsequent attitudes toward the movie?

To answer this question, we draw on research on dialectical thinking, which has examined differences in the degree to which consumers are comfortable with ambiguity or are tolerant of holding apparently contradictory beliefs (e.g., Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Consistent with prior research, we expect that attitudes based on contradictory information depend on consumers’ level of dialectical thinking. Importantly, however, although low (vs. high) dialectical thinkers are generally more likely to adopt extreme positions (Choi & Choi, 2002; Spencer-Rodgers, Peng, Wang, & Hou, 2004), we predict a more counterintuitive impact of dialectical thinking on consumer attitudes when these result from the integration of contradictory information. Specifically, we propose that low, as compared to high, dialectical thinkers process contradictory information about an option less fluently, and that lower processing fluency in turn will undermine the confidence they have in their ability to arrive at an accurate evaluation of the option, resulting in relatively more moderate attitudes. Our predictions are thus counterintuitive but complementary to prior

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research that examined contexts in which lower dialectical thinking tends to increase extremity in consumer responses (Choi & Choi, 2002; Hamamura, Heine, & Paulhus, 2008; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004).

A series of experiments examines our key hypotheses that in contexts of attitude construction based on contradictory information, lower dialectical thinking leads to more moderate attitudes, and that this effect is driven by differences in judgmental confidence via processing fluency. As expected, the first study demonstrates that low (vs. high) dialectical thinking is associated with more moderate attitudes based on contradictory information. However, as the literature would suggest (Hamamura et al., 2008), this effect reverses when attitudes are based on non-contradictory, univalent information. We replicate our main finding in a follow-up quasi experiment that operationalizes dialectical thinking as study participants' ethnicity. Our next two studies then seek to elucidate the process underlying the effect. Specifically, we show that low dialectical thinkers do not exhibit more moderate attitudes than high dialectical thinkers whose processing fluency (study 2) or judgmental confidence (study 3) has been undermined. Consistent with our hypothesis, study 2 also finds that the interactive effect of processing fluency and dialectical thinking is driven by differences in judgmental confidence. Further, study 3 evinces that processing fluency drives the interactive effect of judgmental confidence and dialectical thinking on attitude extremity. Our last study turns from seeking support for our hypotheses by introducing moderators to reduce attitude extremity among high dialectical thinkers to examining a moderator to bolster attitude extremity among low dialectical thinkers. In particular, we evince that low dialectical thinkers with high product knowledge respond as extremely as their high dialectical counterparts to contradictory information, eliminating the differences in attitude extremity based on dialectical thinking.

Our work makes three theoretical contributions. First, we show that the relationship between dialectical thinking and extreme responses is more nuanced than previously thought, and evince the integration of contradictory information as a context in which lower dialectical thinking is associated with more moderate, rather than more extreme, attitudes. Second, we provide evidence that low (vs. high) dialectical thinkers express more moderate attitudes based on contradictory pieces of information because they are unable to process them easily, and that lower processing fluency results in relatively lower levels of confidence. Thus, we extend Maheswaran and Chaiken (1991), who suggest that contradictory information reduces consumers' judgmental confidence, and identify dialectical thinking as a moderator of the contradiction-confidence link. Third, we demonstrate differences in attitude extremity based on the degree of processing fluency. Although past research has shown that greater processing fluency leads to more positive attitudes toward an object (Janiszewski & Meyvis, 2001; Lee & Labroo, 2004; Novemsky, Dhar, Schwarz, & Simonson, 2007; Winkielman & Cacioppo, 2001), our result suggests that when an object becomes difficult to evaluate, attitudes may change not only in valence but in intensity more generally, such that consumers are more moderate either in their positive attitudes or in their negative attitudes.

Contradiction and dialectical thinking

As illustrated in our introduction, consumers are often exposed to contradictory information. Responses to such contradiction are likely influenced by the degree to which they subscribe to the Aristotelian formal logic paradigm: the law of non-contradiction, which states that A cannot equal not-A, because no statement can be both true and false at the same time, and the law of excluded middle, which states that any statement is either true or false, and that a middle ground does not exist (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Although the cognitive paradigm of formal logic is dominant in Western society, there is another mainstream thinking process, which is influenced by the Confucian philosophy emphasizing dialectical thinking, or the principle of contradiction that asserts that two opposing arguments can be both true, and each argument can be both true and false (Nisbett et al., 2001). For instance, Peng and Nisbett (1999) showed that high dialectical thinkers (i.e., Chinese individuals) tend to endorse both sides of an argument that low dialectical thinkers (i.e., North Americans) perceive to be contradictory and hence incompatible. Although cross-cultural differences in the propensity for dialectical thinking are prominent, this cognitive tendency is not limited to East Asian cultures. For example, in Western cultures higher dialectical thinking is more prevalent among older than younger individuals (Riegel, 1973), and among college faculty members than students (Basseches, 1980). The positive association between dialectical thinking and maturity has been explained by the accumulation of knowledge and experience, leading to greater acceptance of contradiction in life (Baltes & Staudinger, 1993; Williams & Aaker, 2002).

Inspired by the disparity between these two cognitive paradigms, research has examined how dialectical thinking impacts individuals' interpretations of external events, as well as their associated affective and cognitive responses in a variety of contexts, including conflict resolution (Peng & Nisbett, 1999), hindsight bias (Choi & Nisbett, 2000), psychological wellbeing (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004), emotional experiences (Hui, Fok, & Bond, 2009; Williams & Aaker, 2002), self-concept stability (Choi & Choi, 2002; English & Chen, 2007), and questionnaire response style (Hamamura et al., 2008).

Seminal evidence that dialectical thinking impacts the interpretation of events came from Peng and Nisbett (1999), who showed that high, as compared to low, dialectical thinkers tend to seek compromise in resolving social conflicts, preferring arguments based on holistic principles over arguments based on the law of non-contradiction. Further, Choi and Choi (2002) found that Koreans embrace inconsistent self-concepts (e.g., being both outgoing and shy) as existing in harmony, whereas Americans tend to have defined, internally stable views of self (e.g., being outgoing and not shy). Similarly, Spencer-Rodgers et al. (2004) showed that Chinese and Asian-Americans, as compared to their Western counterparts, exhibit more contradictory self-attitudes both in closed-ended measures of self-esteem and in open-ended self-descriptions.

Grounded in research demonstrating cultural differences in how interconnected versus independent elements of the universe

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