

Research Article

# The sleeper framing effect: The influence of frame valence on immediate and retrospective judgments

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## Abstract

Prior research on attribute framing has documented a robust valence-consistent shift whereby positively valenced options (e.g., 75% lean beef) are preferred over equivalent negatively valenced options (e.g., 25% fat beef). However, this research has typically explored how labels influence judgments of prospective or hypothetical consumption. In contrast, we examine how frames interact with actual consumption experiences to influence both immediate and retrospective judgments. We find evidence of a *sleeper framing effect* wherein a valence-consistent shift emerges for retrospective judgments even when absent immediately after consumption. We attribute this effect to differences in how consumers integrate the more cognitive information of the frame with the more affective information acquired during consumption. Specifically, three experiments show that consumers attend to and rely relatively more on affective information from experience when making immediate judgments, but relatively more on cognitive information from the frame when making retrospective judgments. In addition, we identify the valence of the experience as an important boundary condition, such that the sleeper framing effect is most pronounced when the experience is relatively neutral in valence.

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Framing effects are well established in human judgment and decision-making research (for a review, see Levin, Schneider, & Gaeth, 1998). Such effects occur when logically or semantically equivalent descriptions lead to different responses. One of the most pervasive findings in the framing literature is the valence-consistent shift (Levin et al., 1998, p. 160); that is, frames with positively valenced attributes (e.g., ground beef labeled as “75% lean”) are preferred over equivalent frames with negatively valenced attributes (e.g., ground beef labeled as “25% fat”), even

though the two alternatives are identical (i.e., 75% lean = 25% fat) (Levin, 1987; Levin, Johnson, Russo, & Deldin, 1985). Importantly, the valence-consistent shift is a “reliable phenomenon” (Levin, Gaeth, Schreiber, & Lauriola, 2002, p. 413) only for judgments of prospective or hypothetical consumption (e.g., LeBoeuf & Shafir, 2003; Levin, Schnittjer, & Thee, 1988; Levin et al., 1985), in which consumers do not actually consume a product.

The present research investigates how consumers integrate information from actual consumption experiences with information from positively and negatively valenced frames to form not only immediate judgments (i.e., evaluations made during or immediately after a consumption episode) but also retrospective judgments (i.e., evaluations made when reflecting back on a consumption episode after a delay). In cases where frame information is disclosed just once and around the same time as the consumption episode, we show that a valence-consistent shift may emerge for retrospective judgments even when it is

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not evident immediately after consumption. We refer to this phenomenon as the *sleeper framing effect* because, similar to the well-known sleeper effect in persuasion (Kumkale & Albarracín, 2004; Mazursky & Schul, 1988), our findings suggest that the relative influence of different informational inputs on consumer judgments may vary temporally. Specifically, we argue that consumers attend to and rely relatively more on the affective information garnered from actual experience when making immediate judgments, but relatively more on cognitive information from the frame when making retrospective judgments. In addition, we show that the sleeper framing effect is moderated by the valence of the consumption experience, such that a valence-consistent shift is more likely to emerge in retrospective judgments when the experience is relatively neutral, versus extremely positive or extremely negative.

## Theoretical background

### *Valence-consistent shifts in framing*

The valence-consistent shift has been widely documented in numerous contexts where a single attribute, object, or event is framed either positively or negatively (Banks et al., 1995; Levin, 1987; Levin et al., 1985; McNeil, Pauker, Sox, & Tversky, 1982; Quattrone & Tversky, 1988). This shift has generally been attributed to associative priming (Levin & Gaeth, 1988; Levin et al., 1988; Mittal, Ross, & Tsuros, 2002; for exceptions, see Janiszewski, Silk, & Cooke, 2003 and Freling, Vincent, & Henard, 2014), with positive or negative labels encouraging the recruitment of similarly valenced information from memory. According to Krishnamurthy, Carter, and Blair (2001), positive framing “generates more positive associations and thus seems more attractive than negatively framed options” (p. 383).

Valenced frames have been shown to exert influence on judgment and decision-making in both the marketplace and the workplace. For example, consumers indicated greater willingness to spend \$30 on a restaurant if they were told there was a 50% chance they would be satisfied with the restaurant as opposed to a 50% chance they would be dissatisfied with the restaurant (Peterson & Wilson, 1992). In another experiment, consumers who learned about a new stereo receiver expected it to perform better if the results of product testing were framed positively (“test market results show that 85% of the users of this product were satisfied”) rather than negatively (“test market results show that 15% of the users of this product were dissatisfied”) (Buda & Zhang, 2000). Even medical students making professional decisions related to their expertise and training were influenced by valenced frames; they were more likely to advocate a surgery described using survival rates (positive valence) as opposed to equivalent mortality rates (negative valence) (Marteau, 1989). Similarly, engineers tended to allocate more funds to projects whose prior performance was framed in terms of successes (positive valence) rather than an equivalent percentage of failures (negative valence) (Duchon, Dunegan, & Barton, 1989).

Although the valence-consistent shift has been observed in a wide variety of contexts, such demonstrations have almost

exclusively been made for judgments of prospective or hypothetical consumption (e.g., LeBoeuf & Shafir, 2003; Levin et al., 1985, 1988). One important exception is a single study by Levin and Gaeth (1988) in which the authors examined how positive (i.e., 75% lean) versus negative (i.e., 25% fat) attribute frames influenced consumers’ evaluations of ground beef that were made after consuming identical samples of the beef. When the frame preceded the taste experience, evaluations of the positive frame group were significantly higher than evaluations of the negative frame group for three (“fat/lean,” “greasy/greaseless,” “low quality/high quality”) out of four scales. The one scale for which the valence-consistent shift was not observed was tastiness (“bad taste/good taste”), a sensory judgment that Levin and Gaeth (1988) noted was “most related to the tasting experience (p. 376).” In the same study, if the frame was provided after the taste experience but before evaluations, the valence-consistent shift was attenuated. Although these results should be interpreted cautiously since they are from a single study, they suggest that the valence-consistent shift may be weaker in cases of actual consumption (e.g., when consumption precedes framing, when making highly sensory judgments, etc.).

In the present research, we further investigate how information from valenced frames is integrated with information garnered during hedonic consumption experiences to influence judgments. However, our primary objective is to determine whether the relative influence of these two inputs differs for immediate versus retrospective judgments. We define immediate judgments as evaluations provided during or within a few seconds of consumption, when experience and frame information both reside in short-term (working) memory. Most memory models agree that information remains in short-term memory for thirty seconds or less, at which time it migrates into long-term memory (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968; Peterson & Peterson, 1959). In our experiments, we compare immediate judgments with retrospective judgments taken 10 to 50 min after consumption, at a point when both experience and frame information would only be available in long-term (i.e., explicit, or declarative) memory. We posit that even in instances when actual consumption attenuates the valence-consistent shift for immediate judgments, it can emerge for retrospective judgments, resulting in the sleeper framing effect.

### *The influence of cognitive and affective inputs across time*

The sleeper framing effect is predicated on the assumption that frames and hedonic experiences provide consumers with qualitatively different types of information. We argue that because “a frame in communication is simply the description delivered by a speaker to a listener” (Sher & McKenzie, 2011, p. 36), it can be considered a type of cognitive input. Consistent with a cognitive conceptualization, framing effects have been discussed in terms of query theory, in which consumers seek out knowledge that is potentially relevant when encountering framed options (Hardisty, Johnson, & Weber, 2010). In contrast, hedonic consumption is characterized by an affective and sensory experience of esthetic or sensual pleasure, fantasy, and fun

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