



The Evaluative Lexicon: Adjective use as a means of assessing and distinguishing attitude valence, extremity, and emotionality



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HIGHLIGHTS

- A novel approach to assessing the valence, extremity, and basis of attitudes
- We examine individuals' use of adjectives when evaluating an object.
- The Evaluative Lexicon indexes whether an attitude is based on affect or cognition.
- We validate the Lexicon in both laboratory and natural text settings.
- The Lexicon provides a means of distinguishing attitude extremity vs. emotionality.

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ABSTRACT

The language – in particular, the adjectives – individuals use can be harnessed to understand the different aspects of their attitudes. The present research introduces a novel approach to measuring attitudes that allows researchers to quantify these aspects. In Study 1, we created a list of 94 evaluative adjectives and asked participant judges to rate the implied valence, extremity, and emotionality of each adjective. This approach allowed us to quantify each adjective along these dimensions and thereby create the Evaluative Lexicon (EL). We validated the EL in Study 2 by experimentally creating attitudes toward novel stimuli in the lab and then measuring them using our tool. In Study 3, we sought to further validate the EL as well as demonstrate its practical and theoretical contributions using a natural-text repository of 5.9 million Amazon.com product reviews. Results from the Amazon.com reviews indicate that individuals use the EL adjectives in ways that further validate their ability and usefulness in measuring valence, extremity, and emotionality even within natural text. These findings, in turn, produced new theoretical contributions regarding the separability of attitude extremity and emotionality as well as their relation to summaries of both univalent and ambivalent evaluations. The findings highlight the importance of attitude emotionality for understanding attitude expressions.

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Words are of immense importance to our understanding of others. They provide a window into people's thoughts and feelings, their intentions and their biases. As such they are of paramount significance when seeking to understand others' perceptions of the world (Holtgraves, 2010). As we think about this world of words, however, it becomes readily apparent that there exists a multitude of words that, at face value, appear to convey similar meanings. For example, we could always just say we "like" or "dislike" an object when we evaluate it. Instead, we turn to words such as "beneficial" or "harmful," or perhaps even "wonderful" or "disgusting." We seem to have an abundance of ways to express the general positivity or negativity we have associated with an object. Why might this be? Why does our language provide us with so many similar words to convey our liking or disliking?

Given this wide range of available language, it appears that our words have more or less subtle distinctions that help us to communicate our internal thoughts and emotions. For this particular paper, we are interested in what these distinctions might tell us about individuals' underlying attitudes. For example, when we describe our smartphone as "wonderful" instead of "helpful," what does that say about the attitudes we hold? One possibility we wish to focus on is that when we use the word "wonderful," we are describing an attitude that is not only more extreme, but also one that has some basis on emotion. The word "helpful," however, is one that may be primarily based on cognition – that is, beliefs about the object and its properties.

This distinction between attitudes based on affect versus those based on cognition has been of great interest to researchers for a number of decades both for its theoretical and practical implications. For example, researchers interested in prejudice measured the cognitive basis of individuals' attitudes toward minority groups by asking them to list their stereotypes and symbolic beliefs (e.g., values that are

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facilitated or hindered by the target group; Haddock, Zanna, & Esses, 1993). These researchers then measured individuals' affective basis by having them list the feelings or emotions they experienced when seeing, meeting, or thinking about members of this group. When predicting overall attitudes toward minority groups, they found that both the cognitive and affective bases were significant contributors to individuals' summary evaluations. Additionally, researchers have found that individuals are relatively more persuaded by an argument when that argument's appeals match the basis of individuals' attitudes for that attitude object (Fabrigar & Petty, 1999). When their attitude is based primarily on affect, individuals are relatively more persuaded by arguments that are also based on affect, and vice-versa for more cognitively-based attitudes. Relatedly, from an individual difference perspective, individuals who generally base their attitudes on affect across a range of attitude objects are more persuaded by an affective appeal for a novel product while those who tend to base their attitudes more on cognition are less persuaded by this same appeal (Huskinson & Haddock, 2004). Finally, it has been theorized, and some evidence found, that affectively-based attitudes are more accessible in memory than cognitively-based attitudes (Fazio, 1995; Van den Berg, Manstead, van der Pligt, & Wigboldus, 2006). Attitudes that are more accessible are more likely to direct attention, more stable over time, and more likely to drive subsequent behavior (Fazio, 1995). All of these findings demonstrate the importance of understanding the contribution of affective versus cognitive bases to the attitudes that people develop.

Given this interest in the affective and cognitive bases of attitudes, different approaches also exist to measure these bases. Early research, for example, often utilized study-specific measures that did not easily transfer to different attitude objects. These scales were often tailored to a single object. For example, when eliciting evaluations of political candidates, researchers asked participants to state, for instance, whether the candidates made them feel "angry" or "hopeful" to measure the affective basis of individuals' attitudes, and how "honest" and "knowledgeable" they seemed to measure the cognitive basis (e.g., Abelson, Kinder, Peters, & Fiske, 1982; Lavine, Thomsen, Zanna, & Borgida, 1998). As is apparent, these words would not readily apply to a diverse range of attitude objects. The difficulty in applying these idiosyncratic scales to different objects also meant that it would be difficult to compare results across studies. Finally, this diversity of scales also led to idiosyncratic definitions of affectively-based attitudes. While some studies focused on emotion-related terms, others equated affect with general evaluations (e.g., very favorable to very unfavorable; Norman, 1975).

Due to these issues, researchers have sought solutions for measuring attitude bases that can be compared across a wide range of attitude objects. These solutions have tended to fall into two different categories. One approach is more open-ended (e.g., Eagly, Mladinic, & Otto, 1994; Haddock & Zanna, 1998; Haddock et al., 1993) and the other is more "closed" (e.g., Crites, Fabrigar, & Petty, 1994). The open-ended approach requires that individuals introspect on each aspect of their attitudes singly and create a list of their beliefs and a separate list of their emotions they had regarding a particular attitude object. After creating these lists, participants would then rate the implied valence associated with each belief and emotion they listed. Researchers could then calculate the average valence associated with each list to predict individuals' scalar ratings of their overall summary attitudes and, in that way, understand whether attitudes toward the particular object were generally based relatively more on affect or cognition. The more "closed" approach, on the other hand, avoided the step of asking respondents to list relevant beliefs and emotions. Instead, using the Crites et al. measure, participants responded to a set of three scales: one set focused on measuring the affective basis, one on the cognitive basis, and one measuring individuals' summary evaluation. The affect semantic differential scales required individuals to select a position on a scale that "best described their feelings toward the object" (love/hateful, delighted/sad, acceptance/disgusted, etc.) while the cognitive scales required

participants to select a position on the scale that "best described the traits or characteristics of the object" (useful/useless, wise/foolish, beneficial/harmful, etc.). Each set of scales, then, required that individuals assess and report on the different possible bases of their attitudes toward an object.

In the current paper, we considered another way to assess attitudes and their bases in an even richer and more flexible manner and one that would allow researchers to test new hypotheses that lead to advances in social psychological theory. In particular, we became interested in the varying connotations of evaluative adjectives, as exemplified, for instance, by the semantic anchors utilized by Crites et al. (1994). They used words like those we mentioned at the beginning of this paper: "beneficial," "harmful," "disgusted," etc. Researchers' intuitive use of these various words, in and of itself, suggests that the words may differ in the extent to which they imply evaluations based on affect or cognition. Would it be possible to analyze words like these and then use that information to better understand individuals' attitudes toward different objects? Is it possible to quantify adjectives like these and what they imply so that when individuals use them we can obtain an enhanced understanding of their underlying attitudes?

Concentrating on these kinds of words and quantifying them would allow us to create a tool that has a number of methodological benefits. First, if we were to simply have participants select words from a predefined list, we would only have to ask them a single question: "which of the following words best describe your attitude toward this object?" As noted earlier, measures of attitude basis often require individuals to introspect on their emotions and beliefs and then list them one-by-one (e.g., Eagly et al., 1994; Haddock et al., 1993). This is likely quite difficult for many participants and, indeed, can lead to missing data from individuals who struggle to list any reactions at all (as in Crites et al., 1994; see also Haddock & Zanna, 1998). Instead of responding to direct questions that require them to introspect and focus on either the affective or the cognitive basis of their attitudes singly, participants could simply select those words that best reflected their attitude. Our approach would give individuals the freedom to choose words – ones that imply affect to differential degrees – that seemed to fit their evaluation regardless of the evaluation's affective and/or cognitive basis. In essence, we could utilize individuals' naturalistic use of different evaluative terms and leverage the denotations and connotations of those specific words. Second, we could increase the efficiency of measuring individuals' attitudes. The open-ended measures require a great deal of time and effort for the respondents to introspect, enumerate, and then rate their emotions and beliefs. The Crites et al. (1994) measure requires participants to respond to numerous separate scales for each attitude object (19 in that specific research), some of which focus attention on feelings toward the object in question and some of which focus attention on the traits or characteristics of the object. Our approach would again ask only a single question with a limited number of response options. Furthermore, given that a single word can communicate multiple aspects of an individual's attitude, a minimal number of selections are required that nevertheless have the potential to provide information regarding multiple variables. Third, this approach would also allow us to measure individuals' attitudes across a range of settings. While the tool we create could be used within a laboratory setting by having individuals select those words that best represent their attitude from a list, it is flexible in that it could also be used to analyze pre-existing text or speech databases that are evaluative in nature (e.g., Amazon.com product reviews, as we demonstrate in Study 3). Expanding the range of domains that researchers could use to measure attitudes and their bases would allow for converging evidence across multiple, diverse samples and enhance the potential for asking new and interesting questions.

Importantly, such an approach could also help to bring attention to an overlooked distinction in the attitudes literature, that between extremity and emotionality. Indeed, to our knowledge, there has not been an attempt to distinguish these two constructs empirically. For

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