

Effects of Comparative Processing and Mere Measurement on Choice of a Brand with Negative Attributes

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Abstract

Negative stories about companies fills our news and the negative stories could affect consumer purchase decisions. This research examines customers who have learned negative information about a company to see whether engaging in comparative processing and the mere measurement effect impact their product choice.

Comparative processing of information has been studied in determining how individuals evaluate information. In comparative processing of options, individuals compare the target option to relative alternatives (Sanbonmatsu et al 2011). This differs from selective processing, in which individuals judge an object only on its own features as selective processing. Research has shown that individuals tend to use selective processing in their decision making rather than comparative processing (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg 1989; Kapoor & Heslop 2009; Sanbonmatsu et al 2011), which tends to lead to decisions that are less than optimal. Selective processing focuses individuals on the target, ignoring other options. Moreover, when using selective processing, individuals have a propensity to focus on positive information (Posavac, Jain, & Cronley 2006) while discounting the value of negative information. This suggests that when individuals instead engage in comparative processing, they should give more weight to negative information in making their decision than someone not using comparative processing and would also be less likely to select the option associated with that negative information.

Another factor that could influence how consumers process negative information is whether they are asked to measure their purchase intention. Research on the “mere measurement” effect suggests that simply measuring purchase intention for a brand will make consumers less likely to choose that brand (Borle et al 2007; Chandon, Morwitz, & Reinartz 2005; Dholakia & Morwitz 2002; Morwitz, Johnson, & Schmittlein 1993). In this situation, consumers construct an attitude about the brand and are motivated to weigh negative information (Feldman & Lynch 1988; Fitzsimons & Morwitz 1996; Morwitz & Fitzsimons 2004). It follows that when a firm measures how likely a customer is to try a product and the customer has recently learned negative information about the company, it will have a negative effect on the customer’s subsequent choice. This paper aims to test effect of comparative processing

on a brand with negative information and whether this effect amplifies the effect of the mere measurement effect on brand choice.

The context of the study was in purchasing candy bars from a manufacturer that the consumer has learned has a poor record on emitting pollution as a result of its manufacturing. The study, modeled after a Morwitz and Fitzsimons (2004) study in which they examined the mechanism behind the mere measurement effect on product choice using the selection of candy bars, used a 2x2 between-subjects factorial design in which (1) facilitating vs. inhibiting comparative processing and (2) the mere measurement effect (tested via the presence or absence of a category-level sampling intention question) were manipulated. Participants were given information about three fictitious Latin American candy bar manufacturers that they were told were planning on entering the United States market as part of their expansion plans. Participants received information about the companies, including information about their pollution levels with one of the companies reportedly having high pollution levels.

At the beginning of the study, participants were presented with an article that they were told was from a Mexico City newspaper that had been translated into English and that the company names in the article had been changed. The article discussed three brands of candy bar and their plans for entering the U.S. market. They were given a set of ratings on taste, fat, calorie content, and shelf life for each brand as well as a pollution rating for each company. The brand that was rated highest in terms of taste was given the worst pollution rating of the three. In a pretest, this brand was found to be viewed less favorably than the other two candy bars.

The first manipulation was whether comparative processing was facilitated or inhibited. This manipulation was used because comparative processing has been shown to use more cognitive resources than selective processing (Sanbonmatsu et al., 2011). In the condition in which comparative processing was facilitated, participants were instructed to engage in comparative processing by thinking about the candy bars and whether they would purchase each brand. In the condition where comparative processing was inhibited, participants had their cognitive resources constrained by being asked to remember a 7-digit number. Immediately following the first manipulation, participants were presented with the second manipulation of a category-level question of which of the candy bars they were most likely to sample. This was based on the mere-measurement effect manipulation used by Morwitz and Fitzsimons (2004).

Several dependent measures were then collected after the manipulations. First, participants were told that the sponsors of the research had provided sample candy bars and they chose a coupon they were told they could exchange for their chosen candy bar. Next, participants were asked about their attitudes towards the polluting, but best-tasting, brand and also to describe why their attitude towards that brand

was positive or negative using an open-ended question which was coded for whether participants mentioned pollution and/or taste. Finally, participants indicated their relative likelihood of purchasing each brand by allocating 100 points across the options with a "0" indicated no intention of purchase and higher numbers reflecting a greater likelihood of purchase for each brand.

The results were analyzed using a 2x2 between-subjects ANOVA, except for the binary measures of choice of the target brand and whether pollution or taste were mentioned in the free response, which were analyzed with binary logistic regression (Table 1).

The results show that facilitating comparative processing influences brand choice, consumer focus on product attributes, and attitude towards the product. When asked to discuss the reasons behind their attitude towards the polluting candy bar, customers who were prompted to engage in comparative processing mentioned the taste of the target company's products less frequently than those who were cognitively constrained, suggesting that comparative processing had an impact on what attributes were considered. Those asked to engage in comparative processing also reported more negative attitudes towards the target product and were less likely to choose the target brand than those in the cognitive constraint condition. Participants with comparative processing facilitated also had a less favorable attitude towards the polluting brand and allocated fewer points to the polluting in the brand in the brand preference task.

For the mere measurement effect, the results were similar to those found in prior research. Measuring the likelihood of sampling the target brand resulted in participants focusing less on the attributes of the product; when asked to describe the reasons behind their attitudes, participants in the condition in which category-level likelihood was measured were less likely to mention taste and were less likely to purchase from the polluting brand.

The results for the mere measurement effect and for the facilitation of comparative processing showed two main effects with no interaction. This suggests that comparative processing and the mere measurement effect use independent resources in the processing of negative information when making product decisions.

Table 1: Means for Effects of Comparative Processing vs. Distraction and Presence vs. Absence of Mitigating Information

| | Comparative Processing | | ANOVA $F(1, 144)$ | Logistic Regression $\chi^2(1, N= 119)$ |
|--|-----------------------------------|--------------|----------------------|--|
| | Facilitated | Inhibited | | |
| Chose polluting/best tasting brand | 26% | 44% | - | 5.28* |
| Category-level sampling likelihood | 4.89 | 6.19 | 2.33* | - |
| Attitude towards polluting/best tasting brand | 3.81 | 4.63 | 5.67* | - |
| Points allocated to polluting/best tasting brand | 22.0 | 33.0 | 6.74* | - |
| Pollution mentioned in free response | 82% | 76% | - | 0.86 |
| Taste mentioned in free response | 49% | 67% | - | 4.90* |
| n | 73 | 75 | | |
| | Category-level purchase intention | | ANOVA $F(1, 144)$ | Logistic Regression $\chi^2(1, N= 119)$ |
| | Measured | Not Measured | | |
| Chose polluting/best tasting brand | 27% | 43% | - | 3.87* |
| Category-level sampling likelihood | 5.55 | - | - | - |
| Attitude towards polluting/best tasting brand | 3.84 | 4.60 | 4.95* | - |
| Points allocated to polluting/best tasting brand | 24.5 | 30.5 | 2.02 | - |
| Pollution mentioned in free response | 84% | 75% | - | 1.76 |
| Taste mentioned in free response | 44% | 72% | - | 16.86*** |
| n | 73 | 75 | | |

* Significant at $p < .05$

*** Significant at $p < .001$

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Keywords: *comparative processing, mere measurement, negative information, positivity effect, brand choice*

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers, and Practitioners: These results help shed light on to how firms can minimize the effects of negative news by minimizing the comparisons consumers might make to competing brands.

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TRACK: Consumer Behavior / Marketing Research