

Re-Inquiries

How Prevalent Is the Negativity Effect in Consumer Environments?

ROHINI AHLUWALIA*

The negativity effect, or the greater weighing of negative as compared with equally extreme positive information in the formation of overall evaluations, is widely believed by media planners and appears to be a well-proven phenomenon in consumer psychology. Although this effect has been extensively documented under conditions of moderate to high processing involvement in the literature, its robustness in consumer environments may be overstated. Specifically, there are important differences between the experimental settings in which this effect has typically been obtained and marketplace conditions. For instance, subjects in past studies have typically evaluated unknown or hypothetical targets with the goal of forming an accurate impression. In the marketplace, consumers may be familiar with brands and likely to process brand-related information with a variety of other processing goals, such as impression and defense motivation. Using two experiments, this re-inquiry delineates conditions under which the negativity effect is likely to emerge and those under which it may be less likely to occur.

Media gurus often give negative news quadruple weight as compared with positive news, in accordance with the Merriam formula used to compute the persuasiveness of media (Kroloff 1988). In other words, the negativity effect, or the greater weighing of negative as compared with equally extreme positive information in the formation of judgments, is a well-accepted assumption by both managers and academics (e.g., Bunker 1996; Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991). The extensive use of negative advertising in the most recent as well as past presidential campaigns attests to the strong belief of the media managers in this assumption.

Although the negativity effect is a robust finding in this literature, some exceptions have emerged in recent years (e.g., Block and Anand-Keller 1995; Skowronski and Carlston 1987). Specifically, it has been absent when the negative information is not considered to be diagnostic or informative

(e.g., Skowronski and Carlston 1987). A related stream of research on message-framing effects in public service campaigns has uncovered additional exceptions. In this research, information is framed as either a benefit of performing (positive) or a negative consequence of not performing (negative) the advocated behavior, with a negativity effect implying greater persuasion with negative as compared with positive framing. The persuasive advantage of negative framing, however, has not been observed under conditions of low information elaboration, for example, low issue involvement (Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy 1990) and high message efficacy (Block and Anand-Keller 1995), both of which reduce the need to carefully scrutinize the message (see Shiv, Edell, and Payne [1997] for an exception).

The current re-inquiry examines two additional factors likely to moderate the well-known negativity effect under conditions previously known to be conducive to it (moderate to high involvement). Importantly, these factors focus on the differences between the settings of past research studies and conditions found in naturalistic environments and raise questions relating to the generalizability of this phenomenon to consumer settings. For instance, in research settings in which the negativity effect has been obtained, subjects evaluate targets with the goal of forming an accurate impression.

*Rohini Ahluwalia is associate professor and Charles W. Oswald Faculty Fellow at the School of Business, University of Kansas, Summerfield Hall, Lawrence, KS 66045 (rohini@ku.edu). The author acknowledges the helpful input of the editor, associate editor, and reviewers. In addition, the author thanks Bob Burnkrant and Zeynep Gurhan-Canli for their insightful comments on a previous version of this manuscript. This research was supported by a grant from the General Research Fund at the University of Kansas.

In contrast, consumers tend to process information about brands with a variety of personal and situational processing goals, such as defending their prior beliefs and managing their impression with others (Chaiken, Giner-Sorolla, and Chen 1996). Also, the negativity effect typically has been examined in the context of unknown targets, while consumers are more likely to be familiar with brands they use. These differences are the focus of this re-inquiry.

Two experiments were conducted to examine these issues. Experiment 1 examines the role of brand familiarity, while experiment 2 manipulates the processing motivation of the consumer. The results suggest that pervasiveness of a negativity effect may be overstated on the basis of past literature. Conditions under which this effect is likely to emerge, be attenuated, and even be reversed in the marketplace are discussed.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

The Negativity Effect and the Role of Diagnosticity

Consistent with past research (e.g., Herr et al. 1991; Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy 1990), the negativity effect is defined here as the greater weighing of negative as compared with equally extreme positive information in the formation of evaluative judgments. It is assessed via the relative weight given to negative versus positive information in the formation of evaluations.

It has its roots in the impression formation research in the 1970s and 1980s, which focused on evaluations of unknown targets under conditions of accuracy motivation (e.g., Anderson 1981; Wright and Weitz 1977). The most accepted explanation for the negativity effect is that negative information is perceived as more useful or diagnostic than positive information for categorizing targets into evaluative categories (Herr et al. 1991). Therefore, negative information receives greater weight in evaluations. This explanation implies that the negativity effect should be attenuated if the perceived diagnosticity of negative information is lowered. Consistent with this rationale, Skowronski and Carlson (1987) demonstrate a reversal of the negativity effect in the context of ability-related human behaviors, a domain in which the diagnosticity of negative information tends to be low. This is because an individual's successes are more informative about his abilities than his failures.

Although negative information typically has been perceived as highly diagnostic in the context of product judgments, it is important to note that diagnosticity judgments are a subjective assessment. In addition to valence, they are dependent on factors that influence the evaluative direction of information processing (e.g., goals of the perceiver). Goal-based directional processing often leads to inferential biases. These biases are typically manifested as goal-consistent overestimation or underestimation of the diagnostic value of a piece of information (Herr et al. 1991).

In other words, negative product-related information has been perceived as more diagnostic than positive information

in settings in which subjects are expected to engage in relatively open-minded processing and are accuracy motivated. The question is, would the negativity effect still emerge when factors that influence the nature of information processing and, therefore, diagnosticity assessments exist in the environment? Two such factors are brand familiarity and goals of consumers.

Brand Familiarity

When consumers are familiar with a brand and therefore have prior beliefs and attitudes, although they may not necessarily have strong feelings or past experiences related to it, their preexisting cognitive structure is expected to guide the interpretation and integration of any new information (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). As such, existence of a prior attitude, even if weak, may lead to consistency-based pressures in information processing (Russo, Meloy, and Medvec 1998). These pressures result in a biased memory search supporting attitude-consistent external information, accepting it at face value (e.g., Ditto et al. 1998) and thereby enhancing its perceived diagnosticity.

For instance, consumers are more likely to support positive information relating to a liked familiar brand as compared with an unfamiliar brand. In doing so, they are expected to enhance the perceived diagnosticity of a new piece of attitude-consistent positive information, perceiving it as more diagnostic than would consumers not familiar with this brand. However, this pattern of biased processing is not expected with negative brand-related information since a weak positive attitude may not be sufficient to invoke more counterarguments in response to a new piece of negative information (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava 2000). As such, even consumers who like the brand are likely to recognize its diagnostic value. In other words, these consumers are expected to perceive the diagnosticity of both positive and negative information as high, weighing them both equally and thereby exhibiting an attenuation of the negativity effect. Consumers who dislike the brand, however, are likely to demonstrate a negativity effect since negative information is attitude consistent for them.

In the current research, I will focus on consumers who like the brand since this scenario is more representative of the marketplace; even though all consumers dislike a few brands, their attitudes toward most brands tend to be moderately positive (Mizerski 1982).

H1: When exposed to positive information relating to a brand, subjects who are familiar (vs. unfamiliar) with it are likely to (a) generate more support arguments, (b) perceive it to be more diagnostic, and (c) give it more weight.

H2: Subjects exposed to new information relating to a familiar brand are likely to (a) elicit an equivalent number of support arguments in the positive and negative conditions, (b) perceive positive information to be as diagnostic as negative information,

and (c) weigh positive information as much as negative information in forming their brand evaluation.

Information-Processing Goals of the Consumer

Much of information processing in the naturalistic environments is goal driven (Chaiken et al. 1996). Importantly, most models of persuasion have traditionally assumed that the primary information-processing goal of individuals is accuracy (e.g., Petty and Cacioppo 1986), or the desire to hold attitudes and beliefs that are objectively valid. Recent theorizing (e.g., Chaiken et al. 1996; Hilton and Darley 1991), however, has concluded that even though it is relatively common for student subjects to be accuracy motivated, alternative processing goals are likely to dominate in naturalistic environments. Two such goals are defense motivation and impression concerns. Defense motivation, generally an outcome of personal factors such as prior beliefs and attitudes, is defined as the desire to confirm the validity of a preferred position and to disconfirm the validity of contrary positions. Impression motivation, or the desire to express attitudes that address the specific interpersonal goals arising from the social context, is associated with situational concerns. It biases evaluative reactions in the direction consistent with demands of the social situation.

The presence of goals is known to result in selective information processing, with perceivers focusing on goal-consistent information and rejecting goal-inconsistent information. Such processing may affect negative and positive information asymmetrically, depending on its goal consistency. For instance, Tykocinski, Higgins, and Chaiken (1994) found that individuals whose psychological self-discrepancy (mismatch between "actual" and "ought" self-beliefs) elicited anxiety in the presence of negative outcomes were motivated to counterargue a negatively framed message but yielded to its positively framed counterpart. In contrast, individuals whose self-discrepancy (mismatch between "actual" and "ideal" self-beliefs) caused anxiety in the presence of positive outcomes were more motivated to yield to a negatively framed message, as compared with a positively framed message.

In our research, processing goals were operationalized via types of consumer involvement. This operationalization was chosen because of its direct relevance for consumer environments as well as its widespread acceptance in the literature (Chaiken et al. 1996; Petty and Cacioppo 1986).

Outcome Involvement. The most well-known and well-researched form of involvement in the literature corresponds to accuracy motivation (Chaiken et al. 1996; Chen, Shechter, and Chaiken 1996; Johnson and Eagly 1989; Leippe and Elkin 1987; Petty and Cacioppo 1986). It is expected to lead to a relatively impartial, open-minded treatment of information with the intent of forming an accurate impression. It is typically manipulated via making a decision imminent or using an issue that may have personal relevance for the subject.

Under such conditions, consumers may be expected to perceive negative information related to familiar and liked brands as more diagnostic than positive information because of two processes. First, a concern to be accurate is likely to attenuate the biasing effects of brand familiarity discussed earlier, thereby lowering the perceived diagnosticity of positive information. Second, as outcome involvement increases, people tend to become more risk averse (Wright and Weitz 1977), focusing their attention on the negative information (Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy 1990) and thereby perceiving it as more diagnostic. Thus,

H3: Outcome-involved subjects exposed to new information about a familiar brand are likely to (a) perceive the negative information to be more diagnostic than the positive information and (b) give more weight to the negative as compared with the positive information.

Impression-Relevant Involvement. In contrast, a second form of involvement, often termed impression-relevant involvement (Johnson and Eagly 1989; Leippe and Elkin 1987), is marked by a selective bias in processing aimed at satisfying immediate social goals and, therefore, corresponds to impression motivation. Specifically, the subject is involved in processing the message because his or her response is likely to be scrutinized in some way and possibly to be instrumental in obtaining social approval. For instance, consumer decisions may need to be justified to family members or friends. Similarly, an organizational buyer may be accountable to others. This type of involvement is typically manipulated by informing subjects that they will be asked to justify and/or explain their responses to consequential others whose opinions may or may not be known (Chaiken et al. 1996).

In fact, whether these opinions are known or not is expected to moderate the effects of this involvement (Chaiken et al. 1996). Specifically, when these views are known, impression-involved subjects are likely to express judgments that mirror these views in order to win approval. However, when the views are not known, their processing corresponds to their desire to avoid appearing foolish in front of an audience. That is, they want to demonstrate that they have carefully considered all the information available. This desire results in a heightened use of all pieces of information, even nondiagnostic ones. A consequence is an overinterpretation of the relevance of nondiagnostic information (Tetlock and Boettger 1989).

It is important to note that even though outcome-involved and impression-involved respondents have both been known to carefully scrutinize the message and engage in elaborative message processing, these involvement states are likely to lead to different types of processing (Chen et al. 1996). For instance, Leippe and Elkin (1987) found that outcome-involved subjects were sensitive to variations in message-argument quality, whereas impression-involved subjects attenuated the differences between strong and weak messages.

Therefore, if impression-involved consumers are aware

of the views of their anticipated audiences, their judgments of perceived diagnosticity are likely to depend on these views. When these views are not known, they are likely to overestimate the relevance of positive information, perceiving both positive and negative information as highly diagnostic and weighing them equally in their decision making. The current research will focus on the latter scenario, that is, when the views of the audience are not known. Thus,

- H4:** Impression-involved subjects exposed to new information about a familiar brand are likely to (a) perceive the negative information to be as diagnostic as the positive information and (b) give equivalent weight to the negative and positive information.

Position Involvement. The third kind of involvement corresponds to the goal of defense motivation. It has typically been operationalized as commitment to a particular stance or brand (Chaiken et al. 1996) as opposed to being involved with the issue in an unbiased, open-minded fashion. It occurs either because the person is publicly attached to this stance (Ahluwalia et al. 2000; Kiesler 1971) or because the issue relates to important values (Johnson and Eagly 1989).

This type of message recipient is likely to counterargue new information that contradicts his or her vested stance but support information that validates it (Chaiken et al. 1996). Thus, while position involvement, like the other forms of involvement, is likely to lead to increased message scrutiny, it is expected to differ in the nature of processing invoked and the level of persuasion obtained. The selective cognitive processing invoked by it is expected to lower the perceived diagnosticity of attitude-inconsistent negative information (Ahluwalia et al. 2000) while enhancing the diagnosticity of attitude-consistent positive information. That is, a reversal of the negativity effect, or a positivity effect, is expected for these individuals.

- H5:** Position-involved subjects exposed to new information about a familiar brand are likely to (a) perceive the negative information to be less diagnostic than the positive information and (b) weight the negative information less than the positive information.

EXPERIMENT 1

Methodology

Design and Procedure. Hypotheses 1 and 2 were tested using a 2 (information valence: positive, negative) \times 2 (brand: unknown, known) between subjects design. Seventy-seven undergraduate students participated in the study. Subjects were run individually. They were informed that they were participating in a consumer survey being conducted by a market research company and the business school to collect consumer opinions of two products planned for introduction in the U.S. market. They were told they

would see at least one piece of information about each product. The subject was handed an information folder that manipulated brand familiarity. In the unfamiliar-brand condition, all the materials in the folder related to a filler product (Sonar cameras). In the familiar-brand condition, three pages related to the target product (Avanti athletic shoes) and one to the filler (camera). Of these, one Avanti page described the company as an established foreign manufacturer of athletic shoes planning an entry in the U.S. market; the other two were ads touting its durability and technology. That is, in the unfamiliar condition, the folder did not contain any information relating to Avanti shoes, while in the familiar condition, it contained two ads and a brief company description.

The manipulation of information valence was administered after the subject read the folder. At this time, the experimenter went to his desk to get the questionnaire. He acted surprised to find a loose-leaf page on the desk and inquired whether the subject had read it. After receiving the expected negative response, the experimenter apologized, told the subject that the page had apparently slipped out of the folder unnoticed, and requested the subject to read it before filling out the questionnaire. The binder holes in the slipped-out page were deliberately torn to explain the mishap. The slipped-out page was either a positive or a negative newspaper article (described later) relating to Avanti shoes. After reading it, subjects completed the dependent-measures questionnaire.

In a pretest of the familiarity manipulation, 29 subjects from the subject pool that was used for the main experiment read one of the two information folders (without the slipped-out page) and reported their evaluation of (good/bad, like/dislike, favorable/unfavorable) and familiarity with (not at all familiar/very familiar) Avanti shoes (seven-point scales). Those in the familiar (vs. Sonar folder) condition reported more positive attitudes (M 's = 4.81 vs. 3.79, $F(1, 27) = 14.15$, $p < .01$) and greater familiarity with the brand (M 's = 4.73 vs. 1.89, $F(1, 26) = 35.88$, $p < .01$).

Target Messages. The positive and negative messages developed in the format of newspaper articles contained either positive or negative statements about the shock absorption ability of the target brand of shoes. The positive (negative) message reported the findings of a recent study that found Avanti shoes to be superior (inadequate) in their level of shock absorption. The messages were adopted from Ahluwalia et al. (2000), who reported their equivalence on extremity, believability, and strength.

Dependent Variables. Subjects were first asked to list all their thoughts while reading the target article. Two judges, blind to the conditions and hypotheses, coded thoughts into three categories: counterarguments, support arguments, and other thoughts (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Since support (counter) arguments consist of reasons for believing in (arguing against) a message, in the negative article condition they included negative (positive) thoughts about Avanti, while in the positive condition they included

positive (negative) thoughts about it. There was 90% agreement between the judges. Disagreements were resolved via discussion.

Next, weight given to the newspaper article in evaluating Avanti shoes was assessed via two 10-point scales (no weight at all/a lot of weight, not at all important/very important; $r = .86$). Subjects assessed the diagnosticity of the information in the newspaper article on three seven-point scales (extremely relevant/extremely irrelevant, not at all useful/of very great use, not at all indicative/very indicative; $\alpha = .90$) on the basis of Klar (1990). Attention to the newspaper article was measured via two seven-point scales (concentrating very little/concentrating very hard, paying very little attention/paying a lot of attention; $r = .77$). This measure was used to assess the subject's level of involvement in message processing.

Results

Subjects unfamiliar with the brand were expected to support negative information more than positive brand-related information, perceiving it as more diagnostic and giving it more weight. However, subjects familiar with the brand were expected to support positive brand-related information more than the unfamiliar subjects, perceiving it to be more diagnostic and giving it more weight than their unfamiliar counterparts (hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 1c). Consequently, familiar subjects were likely to support both positive and negative information equally (hypothesis 2a), perceiving them to be equally diagnostic (hypothesis 2b) and therefore exhibiting an attenuation of the negativity effect (hypothesis 2c). Please refer to table 1 for the cell means.

Cognitive Responses. The 2×2 ANOVA on support arguments demonstrated a significant interaction between brand familiarity and information valence ($F(1, 73) = 3.90, p < .05, r = .23, \beta = .50$), indicating differences in support arguments generated in response to positive and negative information by the subject's brand familiarity. As expected, subjects who were familiar with the brand generated significantly more support arguments when exposed to positive information than subjects in the unfamiliar-brand

condition. Consequently, subjects who were familiar with the brand tended to support the positive brand-related message as much as its negative counterpart ($p > .90$, effect size $d = .03$), although the subjects who were unfamiliar with the brand generated significantly more support arguments in the negative as compared with the positive condition ($p < .01$, effect size $d = .97$).

Perceived Diagnosticity. The ANOVA on mean diagnosticity scores revealed a significant interaction between brand familiarity and information valence ($F(1, 73) = 4.14, p < .05, r = .23, \beta = .52$). Specifically, as expected, subjects in the familiar-brand condition perceived positive information as more diagnostic than subjects in the unfamiliar-brand condition. Additionally, a statistically significant difference emerged between the valence conditions for the unfamiliar subjects ($p < .01$). Consistent with predictions, this difference was not statistically significant ($p > .30$) for the familiar subjects. More important, its effect size ($d = .34$) was considerably smaller than the one obtained with the unfamiliar group ($d = 1.36$). Additionally, main effects of valence ($F(1, 73) = 12.57, p < .01, r = .38$) and familiarity ($F(1, 73) = 8.23, p < .05, r = .32$) were also significant, indicating that negative information was perceived as more diagnostic than positive information (M 's = 5.15 vs. 3.99), and information about familiar brands was considered as more diagnostic than information about unfamiliar brands (M 's = 5.07 vs. 4.16).

Weight Given to Information. A significant interaction emerged between brand familiarity and information valence ($F(1, 73) = 4.00, p < .05, r = .23, \beta = .51$) for the measure of mean weight. The pattern of the interaction followed the diagnosticity results. Consistent with expectations, subjects in the familiar-brand condition weighed the positive information more than subjects in the unfamiliar-brand condition, and a statistically significant negativity effect emerged with the unfamiliar brand (p 's $< .01$). Hypothesis 2b relating to an absence of the negativity effect in the familiar-brand condition also received support. Although the means in this condition were in the direction of a negativity effect, it is important to note that this difference

TABLE 1
EXPERIMENT 1: CELL MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS

Variable	Unknown brand		Familiar brand	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Support arguments	.45 ^a (.59)	1.10 ^b (.85)	1.50 ^a (.73)	1.47 ^a (.96)
Counterarguments	1.05 ^a (.99)	1.00 ^a (.86)	.71 ^a (.92)	.53 ^a (.70)
Total thoughts	3.00 ^a (1.39)	3.52 ^a (1.34)	3.75 ^a (1.38)	3.68 ^a (1.27)
Perceived diagnosticity (seven-point scale)	3.38 ^a (1.17)	5.03 ^b (1.31)	4.83 ^a (1.37)	5.28 ^a (1.32)
Weight (10-point scale)	4.20 ^a (2.10)	7.25 ^b (2.11)	6.13 ^a (2.13)	7.26 ^a (1.97)
Mean attention (seven-point scale)	4.50 ^a (1.19)	4.55 ^a (1.26)	5.16 ^a (1.25)	5.18 ^a (.95)

NOTE.—All contrasts are within each familiarity condition. For each familiarity condition, means in the same row that have different superscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

was not statistically significant ($p = .11$, $\beta = .53$). More important, its effect size was significantly smaller ($d = .58$) than the one obtained with unfamiliar subjects ($d = 1.48$, $Z = 95.00$, $p < .05$). In other words, even though the data do not unequivocally support the elimination of the negativity effect, they clearly indicate that this effect is significantly attenuated in the familiar-brand condition (as compared with the unfamiliar-brand condition). Additionally, the main effects of valence ($F(1, 73) = 19.23$, $p < .01$, $r = .45$) and familiarity ($F(1, 73) = 4.10$, $p < .05$, $r = .23$) were also significant; the pattern was consistent with the diagnosticity results.

Message Attention. The ANOVA revealed only a main effect of brand familiarity ($F(1, 73) = 5.84$, $p < .05$, $r = .27$) such that subjects paid significantly more attention to the newspaper article in the familiar as compared with the unfamiliar-brand condition. These data suggest that the attenuation of the negativity effect in the familiar-brand condition is more likely to be an outcome of the nature of processing than the amount of elaboration. More important, the range of the mean attention scores (4.50–5.16 on a seven-point scale) indicates that subjects were moderately involved in the message-processing task.

Discussion

Experiment 1 demonstrates that brand familiarity is likely to attenuate the negativity effect. Specifically, consumers who were familiar with the brand and liked it tended to support the attitude-consistent positive information significantly more than unfamiliar consumers, perceiving it as more diagnostic than did the unfamiliar group. However, their prior positive attitude did not seem to impact their processing of negative information. Both groups engaged in relatively similar processing of this information, perceiving it to be equally diagnostic. That is, the attenuation of the negativity effect in the familiar-brand condition was driven by the enhanced diagnosticity of positive information in that condition.

Additionally, consistent with other research in marketing (e.g., Pechmann and Stewart 1990), this study finds that significantly more attention is paid to information about familiar as compared with unfamiliar brands. This suggests that consumers may be more likely to notice news and advertising relating to familiar brands. That is, it may be most meaningful to examine negative information effects in the context of familiar brands. As such, experiment 1 demonstrated that the existence of a weak positive attitude for a familiar brand, when no processing goals dominate, significantly attenuated the negativity effect. Experiment 2 was conducted to examine the likelihood of a negativity effect with familiar brands, when various goals dominate information processing.

EXPERIMENT 2

Method

Design and Subjects. Hypotheses 3, 4, and 5 were tested using a 3 (involvement: outcome, impression, position) \times 2 (valence: negative, positive) between subjects factorial design. One hundred four undergraduate students participated in the experiment. Subjects were recruited over the phone to participate in this study.

Procedure. Subjects were run individually. They were informed that the study was being conducted on behalf of the university athletic department, and it was explained that recent policy initiatives from the chancellor's office required the athletic department to consider student input before making major purchases. At present, the athletic department was obtaining student input on three relatively new brands of athletic shoes that were under consideration. In the interest of time, each student would evaluate only one of these brands. All subjects were given a folder containing information about Avanti shoes from experiment 1. After reading it, they were asked to provide their thoughts about Avanti shoes on an audiotape. They were specifically asked to point out the positive qualities of the brand that appealed to them so that the athletic department could gain a better understanding of the features that were likely to appeal to students. This tape recording was conducted to accomplish the manipulation of position involvement described later.

The manipulation of involvement was administered after the subjects' thoughts were tape recorded. They were given directions (described later) that assigned them to the different involvement conditions. After these instructions, the experimenter went to his desk to get a questionnaire for the subject and went through the slipped-out-page incident described in experiment 1. Depending on the valence condition, the slipped-out page was either the positive or the negative newspaper article used in experiment 1. That is, subjects who were equated on their familiarity with the target brand but differed in their processing motivation were exposed to either a positive or a negative article about it.

After reading the article, subjects filled out a questionnaire that included key dependent measures such as cognitive responses, perceived diagnosticity, and weighing. Finally, subjects were debriefed and quizzed for potential hypotheses guessing. Two subjects (one position-involvement negative, one issue-involvement negative) who reported being suspicious about the article slipping out were dropped from the analysis.

Involvement Manipulations. It is important to note that the involvement instructions were provided to all subjects at the same point in the procedure: after formation of an attitude toward the target brand (reading the information folder and thought elicitation) but before exposure to the newspaper article. In the outcome-involvement condition, the subjects were asked to carefully evaluate the brand. They were informed that their evaluations would play a very im-

portant role in the committee's choice because they were one of few students who had been asked to provide input on these shoes (e.g., Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991).

In the impression-involvement condition, they were told that the purchasing committee was interested in obtaining student evaluations as well as understanding the reasons underlying them. They would have to provide a written justification of their evaluation, and a representative from the committee would interview them later for further questions and clarifications relating to their rationale (e.g., Leippe and Elkin 1987).

In the position-involvement condition, after tape recording of thoughts, the subject was told that the Avanti corporation was looking for individuals to include in their promotional campaign and was asked if the company could use their taped thoughts and photograph in their campaign. To establish the face validity of this cover story, it was important that subjects verbalize their thoughts so the experimenter could place his request after listening to them. The subject was photographed and asked to sign a release statement to this effect. Importantly, since the thought-elicitation instructions were likely to lead to favorable brand-related thoughts, this procedure was expected to attach the subject to the brand and commit him/her to a favorable brand evaluation (e.g., Ahluwalia et al. 2000). It is important to note that subjects in all conditions underwent the same thought-elicitation procedure. The only difference in the position-involvement condition was that they signed the release and were photographed.

In order to alleviate any self-presentation and impression-management concerns in the position- and outcome-involvement conditions, subjects in these conditions were told that their responses to the questionnaire were anonymous and were specifically instructed not to put their name on it and, upon completion, to drop it in a collection box near the exit. These instructions were provided after administration of the involvement manipulation but before exposure to the target message (newspaper article) and were expected to remove any impression-management pressures (Lindskold and Propst 1981). A pretest, described next, was conducted to further test for the possibility of impression-management concerns in the position-involvement condition.

Two conditions were run ($n = 43$): position and outcome involvement with negative information. The former was potentially most susceptible, while the latter was least susceptible to impression concerns. The procedure mirrored the main experiment. A measure of impression-management concerns that asked subjects to indicate the degree to which their answers were influenced by what others may think of them (seven-point scale; not at all/to a very great extent) was also included.

Thoughts elicited after exposure to the negative article were coded into two categories: impression-management related and non-impression-management related. The former category included any thoughts dealing with the consequences of endorsing the brand publicly or managing their impression with others (friends, the experimenter, etc.). The

results revealed no differences in the number of impression-management-oriented thoughts ($F(1, 42) = .95$, $M's = .04$ vs. $.00$, $p > .30$) as well as the level of concern with self-presentation ($F(1, 42) = .60$, $M's = 2.38$ vs. 2.00 , $p > .40$) in the two conditions. More important, impression-management thoughts as well as reported concern were very low in both conditions.

A second pretest ($n = 55$) was conducted to test the validity of the involvement manipulations. In the interest of efficiency, only the positive-message condition was run. Specifically, the cost of doubling the sample (subjects run individually) far outweighed the extra insight provided by including the negative-message condition. Since the manipulations were administered before exposure to the target message, there was no reason to expect a simple change in that message to influence their effectiveness. More important, cognitive responses, which are an indicator of involvement type, were also elicited in the main experiment. These data (reported in "Results") support the validity of the involvement manipulations in both valence conditions.

The procedure of the pretest mirrored the main experiment. The dependent measures related to the processing of the slipped-out article. To assess impression involvement (e.g., Siegel-Jacobs and Yates 1996), subjects were asked (seven-point scales) if they thought they would have to justify their judgments to others (definitely did not believe I would have to justify/definitely believed I would have to justify) and how often they thought about ways of justifying their judgments to others while reading the slipped-out article (never/frequently; $r = .72$). Position involvement was assessed via two items: I feel committed to Avanti shoes; and I feel a sense of loyalty to Avanti shoes (seven-point scale: strongly disagree/strongly agree; $r = .90$). Outcome involvement has typically been assessed via effort and attention measures/scales. However, past research shows that all types of involvement enhance attention and effort and, therefore, are not distinguishable on these measures (e.g., Chen et al. 1996; Leippe and Elkin 1987). Instead, outcome involvement is better assessed via criticality of thoughts; it leads to more critical thoughts than impression (Leippe and Elkin 1987) and position involvement (Ahluwalia et al. 2000). Thus, cognitive responses elicited in response to the slipped-out page were used to assess this variable. A measure of mood was included to assess if the endorsement opportunity in the position-involvement condition inadvertently influenced the subjects' mood, thereby leading to a mood-management effect.¹

There was a significant effect of processing instructions on the measures of impression ($F(2, 52) = 14.37$) and position involvement ($F(2, 52) = 10.57$) as well as counterarguments ($F(2, 52) = 7.16$) and support arguments ($F(2, 52) = 6.82$), all $p's < .05$. Subjects in the impression-involvement con-

¹On the basis of Peterson and Sauber (1983), subjects indicated their agreement on a five-point scale (strongly agree/strongly disagree): Currently, I am in a good mood; As I answer these questions, I feel very cheerful; For some reason, I am not very comfortable right now; and At this moment, I feel edgy or irritable.

dition were more concerned about justifying their responses than the other two groups ($M's = 5.60$ vs. 3.33 and 3.00 , $p's < .01$). Subjects in the position-involvement condition reported significantly higher commitment to the brand than the two other groups ($M's = 3.72$ vs. 2.35 and 2.18 , $p's < .01$). The three groups did not significantly differ on the mood measure ($F(2, 52) = 1.59$). Analysis of thoughts revealed that outcome-involved subjects were more critical in their information processing than subjects in any other condition. They had an equivalent number of counterarguments and support arguments ($M's = 1.28$ vs. 1.57), while both impression- ($M's = 2.11$ vs. $.65$) and position-involved ($M's = 2.53$ vs. $.36$) subjects elicited more support than counterarguments. Therefore, the validity of the involvement manipulations was supported.

Dependent Variables. The thought-listing task, diagnosticity, and information weight measures followed those used in experiment 1.

Results

Outcome-involved subjects who were likely to support negative information were expected to perceive it as more diagnostic than positive information and thereby demonstrate a negativity effect (hypothesis 3). Impression-involved subjects were likely to support both messages and, therefore, were expected to perceive both types of information as equally diagnostic, weighing them equally (hypothesis 4). Position-involved subjects who were likely to support positive information more were expected to perceive it as more diagnostic than negative information, thereby exhibiting a positivity effect (hypothesis 5). Please refer to table 2 for the cell means.

Cognitive Responses. Cognitive responses were enlisted to help assess the validity of the involvement manipulations. As mentioned earlier, the different types of involvement can be distinguished by the direction of processing they elicit. As expected, outcome-involved subjects who were critical as well as risk averse elicited more support arguments in the negative (vs. positive) condition and more counterarguments in the positive (vs. negative)

condition. Subjects who were impression involved and therefore motivated to support the presented information did not exhibit any differences in the number of either support arguments or counterarguments in the two message conditions. Subjects who were position involved exhibited defensive processing, eliciting more support arguments in the positive- (vs. negative) message condition and more counterarguments in the negative- (vs. positive) message condition.

Perceived Diagnosticity. Consistent with expectations, outcome-involved subjects perceived the negative message as more diagnostic than its positive counterpart. Impression-involved subjects did not perceive a difference in the diagnosticity of the two messages, while position-involved subjects perceived the positive message to be more diagnostic than the negative one.

Weight Given to Information. Consistent with the diagnosticity results, outcome-involved subjects exhibited a negativity effect, giving more weight to negative as compared with positive information. The impression-involved subjects gave equivalent weight to negative and positive information. Position-involved subjects exhibited a reversal of the negativity effect, giving more weight to positive as compared with negative information.

Discussion

These results indicate that people who are familiar with a brand but differ in their type of involvement or processing goal are likely to assess the diagnosticity of a new piece of brand-related positive or negative information very differently. This difference in diagnosticities is likely to influence the weight allocated to this information.

The data reveal that outcome-involved individuals who strive for accuracy not only support a new piece of negative information more than its positive counterpart but also counter it less. Consequently, they perceive negative information as more diagnostic than its positive counterpart, giving it more weight. Impression-involved subjects, in contrast, motivated by their concern to appear thorough, supported both pieces of information. In doing so, they tended to enhance the perceived diagnosticity of positive information. Con-

TABLE 2
EXPERIMENT 2: CELL MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND EFFECT SIZE
OF THE CONTRASTS FOR EACH INVOLVEMENT CONDITION

Variable	Outcome involvement			Impression involvement			Position involvement		
	Positive	Negative	Effect size (d)	Positive	Negative	Effect size (d)	Positive	Negative	Effect size (d)
Support arguments	1.33 ^a (.77)	2.00 ^b (.84)	.85	1.94 ^a (1.25)	1.71 ^a (1.21)	.20	2.06 ^a (1.07)	.81 ^b (.75)	1.40
Counterarguments	1.17 ^a (1.04)	.61 ^b (.78)	.69	.22 ^a (.55)	.53 ^a (.94)	.41	.44 ^a (.63)	1.31 ^b (1.13)	.98
Total thoughts	4.22 ^a (1.06)	4.27 ^a (1.36)	.04	4.19 ^a (1.07)	4.00 ^a (1.32)	.16	4.06 ^a (1.28)	4.18 ^a (1.59)	.09
Diagnosticity	4.30 ^a (1.25)	5.67 ^b (1.30)	1.10	5.24 ^a (1.14)	5.43 ^a (1.27)	.16	5.63 ^a (.88)	4.56 ^b (.92)	1.22
Weight	5.58 ^a (2.16)	8.39 ^b (2.21)	1.32	7.56 ^a (1.78)	8.00 ^a (1.90)	.21	7.74 ^a (1.24)	6.09 ^b (1.60)	1.19

NOTE.—All contrasts are within each involvement condition. For each involvement condition, means in the same row that have different superscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

sequently, they weighed both pieces of information equally, exhibiting an elimination of the negativity effect.

The position-involved subjects who were motivated to defend their existing attitudes attempted to counterargue the attitude-inconsistent negative information, rating it as relatively weak and specious while supporting the attitude-consistent positive information. Consistent with defensive processing, they perceived the negative information to be less diagnostic than positive information and gave it less weight, exhibiting a positivity effect or a reversal of the negativity effect.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The negativity effect is widely believed by media planners and appears to be a well-proven phenomenon in consumer psychology. However, there are some remarkable differences between the marketplace conditions and settings in which the past negativity research has been conducted. Specifically, consumers in the marketplace are likely to (a) be more familiar with brands about which they receive information, (b) pay greater attention to messages about familiar (vs. unfamiliar) brands, and (c) process brand-related information with a variety of motivations including defense and impression concerns. The current re-inquiry attempts to examine the robustness of the negativity effect under these conditions.

Experiment 1 reveals that when consumers are familiar with a brand and like it, the negativity effect is attenuated (as compared with the scenario of the unfamiliar brand). The results suggest that under these conditions, if the consumer pays attention to new information about the brand, s/he is likely to demonstrate only a weak negativity effect. This is because even a weak positive attitude is likely to invoke consistency motivation, enhancing the weight given to attitude-consistent positive information.

Importantly, as the consumer's involvement and familiarity with the brand increases, s/he is likely to pay more attention to new information about it (Pechmann and Stewart 1990). Whether this increased attention translates into strengthening, eliminating, or reversing of the negativity effect is dependent on the subject's processing goal. Specifically, when the perceiver is motivated by accuracy concerns (e.g., outcome involved), a negativity effect is likely to be observed. However, this effect is eliminated with impression-involved individuals and reversed into a positivity effect by defense-motivated (position-involved) consumers who may be committed to the brand.

As such, this article suggests that although all types of involvement may enhance the subjects' message elaboration, whether this enhanced elaboration leads to a negativity effect is dependent on the nature of processing invoked. Specifically, the nature of processing influences the perceived diagnosticity of information, which in turn determines the weight given to it. Only when the subject's involvement motivates critical and risk-averse processing is negative information likely to be perceived as more diagnostic than positive information and, therefore, weighed more. This situation oc-

curs when the subject is outcome involved. However, the other types of involvement do not invoke processing that enhances the perceived diagnosticity of negative information. They lead to either similar perceived diagnosticities for negative and positive information, implying an elimination of the negativity effect (impression involvement), or an enhanced diagnosticity of positive information, implying a reversal of the negativity effect (position involvement). Therefore, a negativity effect is likely in the marketplace only to the extent to which consumers are accuracy driven and risk averse in their message processing. Past research indicates that in naturalistic environments, this type of processing is less likely to occur than that motivated by situational and personal concerns (corresponding to impression and position involvement; e.g., Hilton and Darley 1991).

It is important to note that defense motivation elicited by position involvement is a stronger form of the consistency motivation induced by brand familiarity. That is, brand familiarity and position involvement represent different points on the continuum of brand attitude strength. As the attitude strength increases, so does the extent of processing bias, weakening the impact of negative information. This can range from an attenuation of the negativity effect (with brand familiarity) to its reversal into a positivity effect (with brand commitment).

Although the reversal has been examined before (Ahluwalia et al. 2000), this article extends our understanding of the defensive processing goal. More important, it examines additional goals (e.g., impression motivation) and proposes an integrative framework for understanding the effect of goals on processing of negative information.

It is also very important to note that past research has obtained a robust negativity effect typically under conditions of moderate to high involvement (Block and Anand-Keller 1995; Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy 1990). Although the level of involvement was not explicitly manipulated in the current experiments, it was expected to correspond to moderate levels in experiment 1 and high levels in experiment 2. Specifically, subjects in experiment 1 were explicitly asked to evaluate the brand but were not given a strong motivation for engaging in extensive processing. Data from the attention scale indicate that, as expected, these instructions led to moderate involvement in the information-processing task. Experiment 2 instructions, in contrast, were specifically tailored to increase the subject's processing involvement and, therefore, correspond to high levels of this variable. In other words, this re-inquiry examines limitations to the negativity effect under conditions previously known to be conducive for it.

In this regard, it is important to note that since my research did not examine the negativity effect under conditions of low involvement, the findings presented in this article may not generalize to such conditions. Future research is needed to fully address the likelihood of a negativity effect under low involvement situations.

In sum, the research reported here suggests that a strong negativity effect is only likely to emerge when consumers

are highly involved in a decision or product category but not attached to the brand in any way or prefer it, and nor are they motivated by any social concerns in processing the new information. That is, a negativity effect may be more limited in the marketplace than is currently believed. The findings of this re-inquiry call for a reassessment of the negativity assumption in the marketing literature and an updating of media impact formulas that assume a robust negativity effect.

[Received May 2001. Revised March 2002. David Glen Mick served as editor and Kent B. Monroe served as associate editor for this article.]

REFERENCES

- Ahluwalia, Rohini, Robert E. Burnkrant, and H. Rao Unnava (2000), "Consumer Response to Negative Publicity: The Moderating Role of Commitment," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 37 (May), 203-214.
- Anderson, Norman H. (1981), *Foundations of Information Integration Theory*, New York: Academic Press.
- Block, Lauren G. and Punam Anand-Keller (1995), "When to Accentuate the Negative: The Effects of Perceived Efficacy and Message Framing on Intentions to Perform a Health-Related Behavior," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 32 (May), 192-203.
- Bunker, Ted (1996), "Right on the Money," *Brandweek*, 37 (8), 30-32.
- Chaiken, Shelly, Roger Giner-Sorolla, and Serena Chen (1996), "Beyond Accuracy: Defense and Impression Motives in Heuristic and Systematic Information Processing," in *The Psychology of Action: Linking Cognition and Motivation to Behavior*, eds. Peter M. Gollwitzer and John A. Bargh, New York: Guilford, 553-578.
- Chen, Serena, David Shechter, and Shelly Chaiken (1996), "Getting at the Truth or Getting Along: Accuracy- versus Impression-Motivated Heuristic and Systematic Processing," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71 (2), 262-275.
- Ditto, Peter H., James A. Scepansky, Geoffrey D. Munro, Anne-Marie Apanovitch, and Lisa K. Lockhart (1998), "Motivated Sensitivity to Preference-Inconsistent Information," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75 (1), 53-69.
- Herr, Paul M., Frank R. Kardes, and John Kim (1991), "Effects of Word-of-Mouth and Product-Attribute Information on Persuasion: An Accessibility-Diagnosticity Perspective," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 17 (March), 454-462.
- Hilton, James L. and John M. Darley (1991), "The Effects of Interaction Goals on Person Perception," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 24, ed. Mark P. Zanna, San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 235-267.
- Johnson, Blair T. and Alice H. Eagly (1989), "The Effects of Involvement on Persuasion: A Meta-analysis," *Psychological Bulletin*, 106 (2), 290-314.
- Kiesler, Charles A. (1971), *The Psychology of Commitment: Experiments Linking Behavior to Belief*, San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Klar, Yechiel (1990), "Linking Structures and Sensitivity to Judgment-Relevant Information in Statistical and Logical Reasoning Tasks," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59 (5), 841-858.
- Kroloff, George (1988), "At Home and Abroad: Weighing In," *Public Relations Journal* (October), 8.
- Leippe, Michael R. and Roger A. Elkin (1987), "When Motives Clash: Issue Involvement and Response Involvement as Determinants of Persuasion," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52 (2), 269-278.
- Lindskold, Svenn and L. Rebecca Propst (1981), "Deindividuation, Self-Awareness, and Impression Management," in *Impression Management Theory and Social Psychological Research*, ed. James T. Tedeschi, New York: Academic Press, 201-222.
- Maheswaran, Durairaj and Shelly Chaiken (1991), "Promoting Systematic Processing in Low-Motivation Settings: Effect of Incongruent Information on Processing and Judgment," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 61 (1), 13-25.
- Maheswaran, Durairaj and Joan Meyers-Levy (1990), "The Influence of Message Framing and Issue Involvement," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 27 (August), 361-367.
- Mizerski, Richard W. (1982), "An Attribution Explanation of the Disproportionate Influence of Unfavorable Information," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 9 (December), 301-310.
- Pechmann, Cornelia and David W. Stewart (1990), "The Effects of Comparative Advertising on Attention, Memory, and Purchase Intentions," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 17 (September), 180-191.
- Peterson, Robert A. and Matthew Sauber (1983), "A Mood Scale for Survey Research," in *Proceedings of the American Marketing Association's Educators' Conference*, Chicago: American Marketing Association, 409-414.
- Petty, Richard E. and John T. Cacioppo (1986), *Communication and Persuasion: Central and Peripheral Routes to Attitude Change*, New York: Verlag.
- Russo, J. Edward, Margaret G. Meloy, and Victoria H. Medvec (1998), "Predecisional Distortion of Product Information," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 35 (4), 438-452.
- Shiv, Baba, Julie A. Edell, and John W. Payne (1997), "Factors Affecting the Impact of Negatively and Positively Framed Ad Messages," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 24 (3) (December), 285-294.
- Siegel-Jacobs, Karen and J. Frank Yates (1996), "Effects of Procedural and Outcome Accountability on Judgment Quality," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 65 (1), 1-17.
- Skowronski, John J. and Donal E. Carlston (1987), "Social Judgment and Social Memory: The Role of Cue Diagnosticity in Negativity, Positivity, and Extremity Biases," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 105 (January), 131-142.
- Tetlock, Philip E. and Richard Boettger (1989), "Accountability: A Social Magnifier of the Dilution Effect," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57 (3), 388-398.
- Tykowski, Orit, Tory E. Higgins, and Shelly Chaiken (1994), "Message Framing, Self-Discrepancies, and Yielding to Persuasive Messages: The Motivational Significance of Psychological Situations," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 20 (February), 107-115.
- Wright, Peter and Barton Weitz (1977), "Time Horizon Effects on Product Evaluation Strategies," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 14 (4), 429-443.

Copyright of Journal of Consumer Research is the property of Journal of Consumer Research, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.