

“I love it” or “I hate it”? The positivity effect in stated preferences for agent evaluation

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Abstract Consumers often interact with agents to obtain advice about products and services. A consumer’s evaluation of an agent as a source of personalized advice depends, in part, on the extent to which the consumer believes the agent knows and shares her tastes. In this research, we show a positivity effect in the agent evaluation process, whereby consumers perceive alternatives they love (compared to hate) to be more informative to agents about their tastes, and hence more diagnostic to agents for predicting their future evaluations. Further, we show that this positivity effect is moderated by the agent’s level of agreement with the consumer, and is driven by the greater accessibility of information about loved, compared to hated, alternatives. We discuss the implications of these results for interpersonal judgments and agent choice.

Keywords Agent · Preference · Similarity · Word-of-mouth

Consumers often seek advice from agents, such as realtors and video store clerks (Bearden and Etzel, 1982; Solomon, 1986). In such situations, a consumer’s evaluation of an agent as a source of advice depends, in part, on the extent to which the consumer believes the agent knows and shares her tastes (Gershoff and Johar, 2006). In order to teach an agent about her tastes, a consumer may provide the agent with her evaluations of a subset of products in the category (Cooke et al., 2002; West, 1996). For example, a consumer buying a house might

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provide a realtor with her positive or negative evaluations of a number of properties, so that the realtor might be able to evaluate other homes on behalf of the consumer. At other times, the agent might reveal his evaluations to the consumer. For example, a realtor may convey his opinions of various properties to the consumer, and the consumer may use this information to judge similarity of their tastes, and hence suitability of the realtor as a source of future advice about homes.

Prior work on word-of-mouth communications between consumers and agents has generally found a negativity effect for judgments of products, whereby consumers consider negative evaluations of a product as more informative than positive evaluations as inputs to product judgment (e.g., Folkes and Kamins, 1999; Herr et al., 1991). In contrast, we show a positivity effect for judgments involving agents, whereby consumers consider their own previously loved (compared to hated) alternatives to be more diagnostic to agents about their tastes, and hence more useful as a basis for future agent advice. Further, we show that this positivity effect is attenuated when an agent disagrees with a consumer's evaluations, and that the effect is driven by greater accessibility of information about loved, compared to hated alternatives. We conclude by discussing theoretical implications of our results for interpersonal judgments, and practical implications for agent choice.

1. Theoretical development

1.1. Negativity and positivity effects

A robust finding in psychology and consumer research has been the negativity effect, in which negative information has a greater impact than positive information on judgment and choice (Baumeister et al., 2001; Herr et al., 1991; Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy, 1990; Skowronski and Carlston, 1987). In particular, Herr et al. (1991) and Folkes and Kamins (1999) found that negative information is weighted more heavily than positive information in forming attitudes toward products and services. This negativity effect has been widely accepted among practitioners as well, as evidenced by the greater weight given to negative news in evaluating media impact and in the extensive use of negative advertising in many political campaigns (e.g., Kroloff, 1998). It has been argued that the negativity effect arises because negative information is highly diagnostic for unambiguously categorizing an object as bad, compared to positive information which is less diagnostic for unambiguously categorizing an object as good (Folkes and Patrick, 2003; Herr et al., 1991).

Recent research, however, indicates that the negativity effect may be attenuated, or even reversed into a positivity effect in situations where positive information is perceived to be more diagnostic. For example, it has been found that the persuasive advantage of negative framing is attenuated under conditions of 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. Skowronski and Carlson (1987) demonstrated a reversal of the negativity effect in the context of ability-related human behaviors, a domain in which positive information is more diagnostic than negative information as the basis for judgment. Similarly, Ahluwalia (2002) showed that positive brand information is more persuasive than negative brand information when the brand in question is familiar and liked, a situation where consumers are motivated to defend their prior attitude by focusing on positive brand information. Likewise, Folkes and Patrick (2003) found that positive experiences with individual service providers influence inferences about the firm more than negative experiences, due to a belief that positive, rather than negative, behaviors are more characteristic

of service providers. Extending this stream of research, we hypothesize a positivity effect for agent judgments, whereby consumers consider their own previously loved (compared to hated) alternatives to be more diagnostic to agents about their tastes, and hence more useful as a basis for future agent advice. This effect, we argue, arises from the greater accessibility in memory of information related ones's loves, compared to one's hates.

1.2. Accessibility of loves and hates

Previous research suggests that individuals are likely to search more extensively, and encode more deeply, information about objects they love compared to objects they hate (West et al., 1996). When individuals encounter an alternative they love, they are motivated to elaborate on the reasons for their evaluation of the object, so that they can seek out alternatives with similar attributes in the future. Additionally, because individuals seek out loved alternatives and avoid hated alternatives, they have more opportunity to learn about what they love compared to what they hate, leading to strong and extensive memory encoding for information related to loves. In contrast, when they experience an alternative they hate, they are less likely to expose themselves to similar alternatives, leading to weaker and less extensive memory encoding for information related to hates. Consequently, information about loved objects is likely to be more accessible in memory than hated objects (Cacioppo et al., 1999). Consistent with this argument, Herr and Page (2004) found that liking queries about objects were answered faster and more spontaneously than disliking queries about objects, and this effect was greater for positive than for negative stimuli (see Experiment 3). These results suggest an accessibility advantage of information about one's loves over one's hates, and thus provide a basis for making predictions about the positivity effect in agent evaluation.

Consider a situation where a consumer is providing a prospective agent, such as a realtor, with her evaluation of some alternatives so that the agent might understand her taste and thus be able to predict her future evaluations. If consumers have a more accessible and extensive semantic network surrounding loves (compared to hates), then consumers who reveal loved alternatives to an agent are likely to perceive that they are revealing comparatively more information about their tastes. Therefore, revelation of a loved alternative should be perceived as being more diagnostic to a prospective agent for understanding the consumer's tastes, and for predicting the consumer's future evaluations. Notably, this prediction is consistent with the accessibility-diagnosticsity framework, which posits that accessibility of information is a key determinant of its impact on judgment and decision-making (Feldman and Lynch, 1988). In particular, similar to our reasoning, Feldman and Lynch (1988) suggest that elaboration of information associated with an object can affect its accessibility, and hence its impact on judgment. The preceding arguments are summarized in the following hypothesis:

H1: Positive prior evaluations (i.e., loves) compared to negative prior evaluations (i.e., hates) will be perceived by consumers as being more informative to agents for (a) judging consumers' taste, and (b) predicting consumers' future evaluations.

When a consumer provides a prospective agent with her evaluation of an alternative, the agent may respond by agreeing or disagreeing with the evaluation. For example, a consumer might discover that a video store clerk agrees with her evaluations of some movies, while disagreeing with evaluations of other movies. These instances of agreement or disagreement give the consumer an opportunity to evaluate the similarity of their tastes with the agent, and hence the extent to which the agent can accurately predict their future evaluations. In such contexts, we argue that the positivity effect is moderated by agreement or disagreement

with the prospective agent, such that the effect holds for agreements but is attenuated for disagreements.

When a prospective agent agrees with a consumer's evaluation of an alternative, the accessibility mechanism outlined earlier indicates a positivity effect such that agreement on a loved alternative, compared to a hated alternative, will lead to greater perceived similarity of tastes, and perceived ability of the agent to predict future evaluations. Compared to a hated alternative, a loved alternative is likely to cue a more accessible semantic network associated with the reasons for liking the alternative. Thus, when a prospective agent agrees with a consumer on a loved alternative, the consumer may infer that they have similar tastes for a relatively large set of underlying attributes. High levels of inferred similarity of taste, in turn, are likely to increase the perceived ability of the agent to predict the consumer's future evaluations. In contrast, when the agent agrees with the consumer's evaluation on a hated alternative, the less accessible semantic network of hates may lead the consumer to infer that they have similar tastes on a relatively small set of attributes. As a result, the consumer may be less likely to perceive the agent as being able to accurately predict her future evaluations. Notably, this positivity effect in the domain of agreements would be consistent with Gershoff et al. (2003), who found that individuals asked to "imagine" that they agreed with prospective agents on loved and hated movies, preferred agents who agreed on loved movies. In the present research, we perform a stronger test of this positivity effect by manipulating consumer-agent agreements using actual loved and hated alternatives elicited from study participants.

What if the prospective agent disagrees with a consumer's evaluation of an alternative? In this case, we hypothesize that the positivity effect will be attenuated. Compared to agreements, disagreements do not permit consumers to utilize the semantic network associated with their own loves and hates to make inferences about the agent. This is because, when an agent disagrees with a consumer, the consumer can no longer rely only on the reasons accessed from her own memory for evaluating the alternative, as the basis for making inferences about the agent. Instead, the consumer may now be prompted to generate other potential reasons why the agent has come to a different evaluation of the same alternative. As a result, the advantage of a more accessible semantic network associated with loved alternatives, compared to hated alternatives, will be diminished when the agent disagrees with the consumer. Consequently, there should be no significant difference between disagreements with the agent on loves, versus disagreements on hates, on perceived similarity of taste and perceived ability of the agent to predict the consumer's future evaluations.

Notably, the above argument is consistent with previous research indicating that information which is incongruent (i.e., mismatched) with prior expectations is processed in a more systematic manner, while congruent information tends to be processed in a more heuristic manner (e.g., Maheswaran and Chaiken, 1991). Similarly, in the present case, we argue that disagreements between consumers and agents are likely to prompt more systematic processing, marked by generation of additional reasons beyond the semantic network already accessed from memory. One way to test this underlying processing difference between disagreements and agreements would be through consumers' reaction times to agent choice. If agreements favor reliance on information in memory, then agreements on loves (which have a more accessible semantic network) should be associated with quicker reaction times to agent choice than agreements on hates. In contrast, if disagreements prompt the generation of additional reasons beyond memory information, then the reaction time advantage of loves over hates should be attenuated in the case of disagreements. As a result, there should be no difference in reaction times to agent choice between disagreements on loves,

and disagreements on hates. Moreover, these disparities in response latency should also manifest themselves within rating valence. That is, if disagreements result in more systematic (and therefore slower) processing than agreements, response times should be slower when an agent disagrees with the consumer, regardless of whether the consumer's evaluation is love or hate. The arguments developed above are summarized in the following hypotheses.

H2a: Agreement on positive prior evaluations, compared to agreement on negative prior evaluations, will be associated with (i) greater perceived similarity of taste with agents, (ii) greater perceived ability of agents to predict future evaluations, and (iii) faster reaction times to agent choice.

H2b: Disagreement on positive prior evaluations, compared to disagreement on negative prior evaluations, will *not* be associated with (i) differences in perceived similarity of taste with agents, (ii) differences in perceived ability of agents to predict future evaluations, or (iii) differences in reaction times to agent choice.

H3: Compared to disagreements, agreements on prior evaluations will be associated with faster reaction times to agent choice, regardless of the valence of the prior evaluation.

We tested our hypotheses in two studies. Study 1 examined the positivity effect in the case of individuals revealing their prior evaluations to prospective agents (i.e., H1). Study 2 examined the positivity effect in the case of individuals agreeing or disagreeing with prospective agents, and also tested the underlying mechanism using reaction time measures (i.e., H2 and H3).

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

Study 1 used a one-way between-subjects design with three conditions: loves, hates, and free choice. One hundred and sixty nine undergraduate students at a large northeastern university participated in the study. Participants began by using a five point scale anchored by "I hate it" and "I love it" to evaluate fifty wall posters that had been randomly drawn from a student-focused online store. Next, participants were told that their evaluations for three of the fifty posters would be revealed to another student, who was going to be asked to predict the participant's evaluations for a different set of fifty posters from the same store. In the free choice condition, participants selected any three posters from the fifty they had evaluated. In the hates and loves conditions, participants were restricted to selecting only three that they had rated as "I hate it" or "I love it," respectively. Participants then used seven point scales to indicate the degree to which the three posters were representative of their tastes, informative about their tastes, and told a lot about their tastes. Participants also rated their confidence in the other student's ability to predict their future evaluations, and the likelihood that the other student would be accurate in predicting their future evaluations of movie posters.

2.2. Results

A measure of perceived informativeness for judging one's tastes was created by combining the items assessing representativeness about tastes, informativeness about tastes, and telling

a lot about tastes ($\alpha = .85$). A measure of perceived agent ability to predict future evaluations was created by combining the items of confidence in, and predictive accuracy of the other student ($\alpha = .83$). Separate one-way ANOVAs yielded significant main effects for both dependent variables [informativeness ($F(2, 163) = 3.26, p < .05$), and agent ability ($F(2, 166) = 5.61, p < .01$)]. Consistent with H1, participants rated revealed loved posters as being more informative about their tastes than revealed hated posters ($M_s = 3.99$ vs. 3.49 ; $t(163) = 2.19, p < .05$). Similarly, perceived ability of the prospective agent to predict future evaluations was higher in the loves than in the hates condition ($M_s = 3.69$ vs. 3.28 ; $t(166) = 1.94, p < .06$). Participants' free choice of posters lent further support to the positivity effect in revealed evaluations. Consistent with the notion that loves are perceived as more informative than hates, virtually all the participants in the free choice condition (97%) chose *only* loved posters as the posters they wanted the other student to see as information for making predictions about their future evaluations. Further, as in the loves condition, participants in the free choice condition rated the informativeness of their revealed evaluations to be higher than those in the hates condition ($M_s = 4.09$ vs. 3.49 ; $t(163) = 2.07, p < .05$), and indicated that the prospective agent would be able to better predict their future evaluations, compared to the hates condition ($M_s = 4.17$ vs. 3.28 ; $t(166) = 3.27, p < .001$).

We had argued earlier that the positivity effect arises from differential accessibility of information about loves, compared to hates. However, there are two alternative explanations for observed positivity effect based on the relative frequencies of loved and hated alternatives in the evaluated set. First, information theory suggests that the diagnosticity of a datum may depend on its frequency of occurrence, such that low frequency events are more diagnostic than high frequency events (Coombs et al., 1970). If perceived informativeness ratings in the present study were driven by frequency of occurrence then, in the loves condition, we would expect participants who loved few posters (compared to those who loved many posters) to report higher perceived informativeness of their revealed posters. Similarly, in the hates condition, we would expect participants who hated few posters (compared to those who hated many posters) to report higher perceived informativeness of their revealed posters. Another alternative explanation based on frequency of loved and hated alternatives is that participants perceived their revealed posters to be more informative when they were selected from a set that included more, as opposed to fewer, posters. For example, if a participant loved many alternatives in the set, then she had many options from which to choose the most informative three alternatives to reveal to the prospective agent. As a result, the participant may have felt a sense of having purposefully selected alternatives that were highly representative of her tastes. If this were the case, then we would expect participants who loved many posters (compared to those who loved few) to report higher perceived informativeness of their revealed posters.¹

To examine these alternative explanations, we performed median splits on the number of posters participants rated as five stars in the loves condition, and also on the number of posters participants rated as one star in the hates condition. In the loves condition, there was no significant difference between those who loved fewer versus those who loved more posters in the evaluated set, on perceived informativeness of revealed posters ($M_s = 3.90$ vs. $4.07, F(1, 132) < 1, p < .61, ns$), or expected ability of the agent to predict future evaluations ($M_s = 3.50$ vs. $3.85, F(1, 135) = 1.26, p < .26, ns$). Similarly, in the hates condition, there was no significant difference between those who hated fewer versus more posters in the evaluated set, on perceived informativeness of revealed posters ($M_s = 3.42$ vs. $3.54, F(1, 132) < 1,$

¹ We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this possible alternative explanation.

$p < .71$, *ns*), or on expected ability of the agent to predict future evaluations ($M_s = 3.24$ vs. 3.31 , $F(1, 135) < 1$, $p < .84$, *ns*). These results indicate that perceived informativeness of revealed evaluations was unaffected by the frequency of loved or hated posters in the evaluated set, thus ruling out both frequency-based alternative explanations for the observed positivity effect.

To sum up, the results of Study 1 support hypothesis H1, i.e., a positivity effect when individuals reveal their own evaluations to potential agents. When participants were free to reveal any of their evaluations to a prospective agent as information for predicting future evaluations, nearly all participants revealed only alternatives they loved. When constrained to reveal only loves or hates, participants who revealed loves (compared to hates) thought that their revealed evaluations were more informative about their tastes, and expected that the agent would better predict their future evaluations. Finally, additional analysis ruled out two frequency-based alternative explanations for the observed positivity effect. In the next study, we examine the positivity effect when individuals learn about agreement or disagreement with prospective agents, and use reaction time measures to test the underlying accessibility mechanism.

3. Study 2

3.1. Method

Study 2 used a 2 (Participant Rating: Love/Hate) \times 2 (Agent Response: Agree/Disagree) within subjects design, with sixty undergraduate participants from a large northeastern university. Using a computerized interface, participants first provided the names of at least three previously viewed movies that they had hated (i.e., one-star movies) and at least three that they had loved (i.e., five-star movies). Next, they evaluated potential agents who either agreed or disagreed with their one-star or five-star evaluations. To do this, participants undertook a conjoint task in which they made a series of six pair-wise choices, each between two different agents who had “rated” movies randomly selected from those the participant loved or hated. Each of the six pair-wise choices involved choosing the person they would prefer to be their “personal movie critic”. By making the six choices, participants chose between all possible combinations of their own love and hate evaluations and prospective agents who agreed and disagreed with them (see Appendix A). To control for order effects, the presentation of potential agents was randomized across participants and screen positions. Additionally, to control for learning effects, the potential agents were identified by different simulated participant numbers, so every prospective agent appeared to be a unique student who had participated in the study at an earlier date (see Appendix B). Participants’ response times were also collected for each of the six choices.

After completing the conjoint agent choice task, participants were presented with four potential agents who represented the four possible combinations arising from participant loves/hates and agent agreement/disagreement. Participants rated each of these four agents on perceived ability of the agent to predict future evaluations (“This person would be a good personal movie critic for me”) and perceived similarity of taste (“This person and I have similar tastes in movies,” “This person loves what I love in a movie,” and “This person hates what I hate in a movie”). Seven point scales anchored by strongly disagree/strongly agree were used for all scaled measures. Participants were also asked to estimate the approximate percentage of the movie-going public who would be likely to agree with their ratings of each of the movies they had provided earlier. These data were collected to explore another alternative explanation

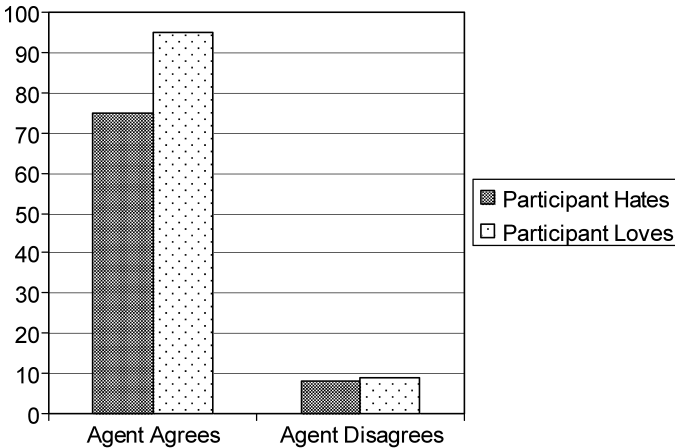


Fig. 1 Study 2: Mean choice proportions

for the positivity effect, based on perceived frequency of love and hate matches in the population.

3.2. Results

The mean choice proportions in each experimental condition are presented in Fig. 1. Using a multinomial logit model, significant main effects were found for participant rating ($t(357) = 3.25, p < .01$) and agent response ($t(357) = 6.90, p < .001$), as well as the interaction of participant rating and agent response ($t(357) = 2.59, p < .01$). Follow up comparisons indicated that, consistent with H2a, choice of a prospective agent was more frequent when the participant and the prospective agent agreed on a loved alternative compared to when they agreed on a hated alternative ($M_s = 94.6\%$ vs. 77.1% , $t(179) = 7.03, p < .001$). In contrast, as hypothesized in H2b, no such effect was observed when the agent hated what the participant loved, versus when the agent loved what the participant hated ($M_s = 9.2\%$ vs. 8.3% , $t < 1, ns$).

Participants' ratings of the perceived ability of each agent to predict their future ratings were also supportive of H2a–H2b (see Fig. 2). Repeated measures ANOVA revealed significant main effects for agent response, with agreement leading to higher perceived predictive ability than agent disagreement ($M_s = 5.42$ vs. 1.48 , $F(1, 59) = 343.95, p < .001$), and a directional main effect for participant's rating, with loves leading to greater perceived predictive ability than hates ($M_s = 3.53$ vs. 3.38 , $F(1, 59) = 2.03, p < .16$). Most importantly, there was a significant interaction of participant rating and agent response ($F(1, 59) = 14.38, p < .01$) such that, as hypothesized in H2a, agreement on movies the participants loved was associated with greater perceived predictive ability than agreement on movies the participants hated ($M_s = 5.67$ vs. 5.17 , $F(1, 59) = 11.49, p < .001$). In contrast, and consistent with H2b, agent disagreement on movies the participants loved was not associated with significantly different ratings of predictive ability, compared to agent disagreement on movies the participants hated ($M_s = 1.58$ vs. 1.38 , $F(1, 59) = 2.30, p > .10, ns$).

Hypotheses H2a–H2b were also tested by a repeated measures ANOVA conducted on similarity of taste as the dependent variable (see Fig. 3). This analysis revealed a significant

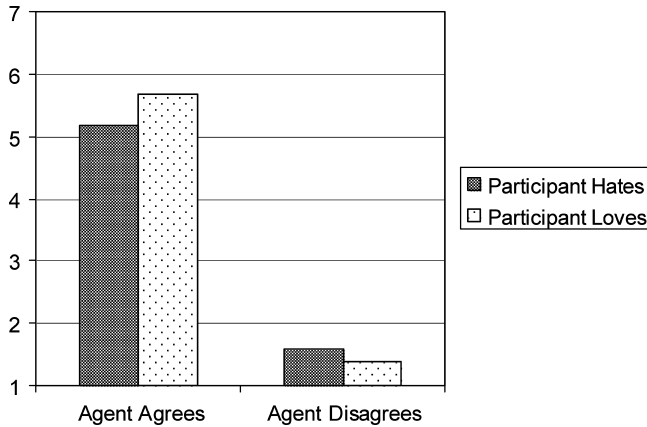


Fig. 2 Study 2: Perceived predictive ability

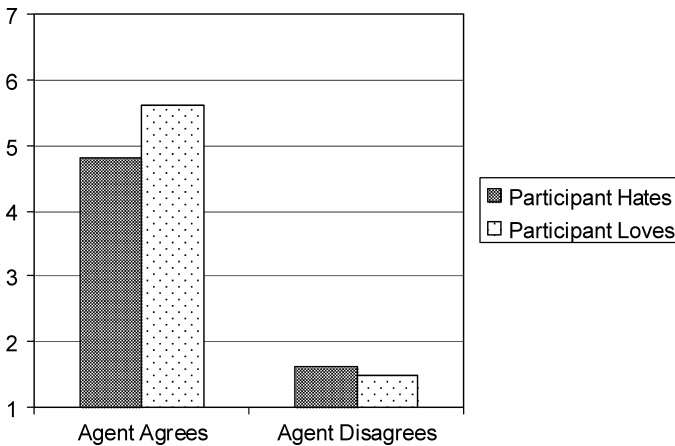


Fig. 3 Study 2: Perceived similarity of taste

main effect for participants’ rating, such that loves were associated with greater perceived similarity in taste than hates ($M_s = 3.37$ vs. 3.21 , $F(1, 59) = 4.60$, $p < .05$), as well as a significant main effect for agent response, such that agreement was associated with greater perceived similarity in taste than disagreement ($M_s = 4.89$ vs. 1.69 , $F(1, 59) = 323.02$, $p < .001$). Most interestingly, there was a significant interaction of participant rating and agent response ($F(1, 59) = 7.86$, $p < .01$) such that, as hypothesized in H2a, agent agreement on movies that the participants loved was associated with greater similarity ratings than agent agreement on movies that the participants hated ($M_s = 5.08$ vs. 4.69 , $F(1, 59) = 9.23$, $p < .01$). In contrast, and consistent with H2b, agent disagreement on movies that the participants loved was not associated with significantly different similarity ratings, compared to agent disagreement on movies that the participants hated ($M_s = 1.66$ vs. 1.73 , $F(1, 59) < 1$, ns).²

² These results were corroborated by an ANOVA run on the single item, “This person and I have similar tastes in movies”. There were significant main effects of participant rating ($F(1, 59) = 10.83$, $p < .01$) and agent

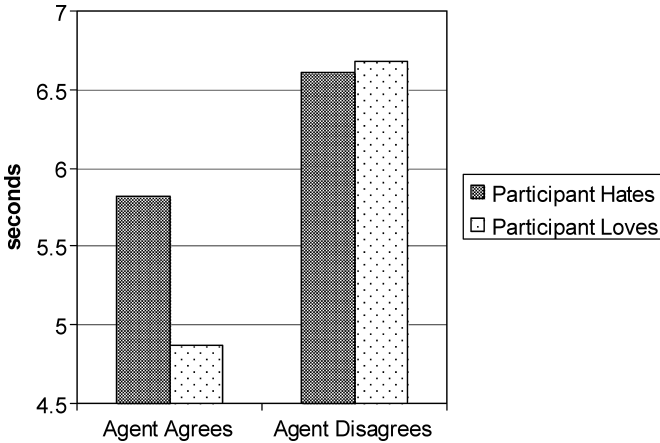


Fig. 4 Study 2: Mean reaction times for choice

The accessibility mechanism said to underlie the positivity effect was tested by analyzing participants' reaction times in the conjoint choice task. The mean reaction time across all choices was calculated for each of the four participant-agent combinations, namely participant loves or hates/agent agrees or disagrees (see Fig. 4). Repeated measures ANOVA using mean reaction time as the dependent variable showed main effects for participant rating ($F(1, 59) = 7.22, p < .01$) and agent response ($F(1, 59) = 33.20, p < 0.001$), as well as their interaction ($F(1, 59) = 4.38, p < 0.05$). Consistent with H2a, reaction times were faster for agreement on loved movies than for agreement on hated movies ($M_s = 4.87$ vs. 5.82 seconds, $F(1, 59) = 9.06, p < .01$). In contrast, and consistent with H2b, there was no difference in reaction times when the agent hated what the participant loved, versus when the agent loved what the participant hated ($M_s = 6.68$ vs. 6.61 second, $F(1, 59) < 1, ns$). Further, consistent with H3, reaction times for movies that the participant loved were faster when the agent agreed than when the agent disagreed ($M_s = 4.87$ vs. 6.68 seconds, $F(1, 59) = 29.57, p < .001$), and reaction times for participants' hated movies were also faster for agreements as compared to disagreements ($M_s = 5.82$ vs. 6.61 seconds, $F(1, 59) = 5.56, p < .05$).

Finally, an alternative explanation for the observed positivity effect is that agreement on loves is perceived to occur less frequently in the population than agreement on hates, and therefore when one finds that he or she agrees with another individual on a loved alternative, it is more diagnostic than agreement on a hated alternative (Coombs et al., 1970). If this frequency-based explanation were true, participants should have indicated lower perceived consensus in the population for their loved ratings, compared to their hated ratings. However, this was not observed in the data. On the contrary, participants' estimates of the percentage of the movie-going public who were likely to agree with their ratings was greater for movies they loved than for movies they hated ($M_s = 70.35\%$ vs. 49.74%; $F(1, 59) = 53.98,$

response ($F(1, 59) = 304.44, p < .0001$), as well as an interaction ($F(1, 59) = 27.60, p < .0001$). Similar to results with the three-item scale, loves led to significantly greater perceptions of similarity than did hates ($M_s = 5.62$ vs. 4.82, $F(1, 59) = 25.29, p < .0001$) in the domain of agreements, but this effect did not hold in the domain of disagreements ($M_s = 1.48$ vs. 1.62, $F(1, 59) = 1.62, p > .20, ns$).

$p < 0.001$), ruling out this frequency-based alternative explanation for the observed positivity effect.

4. General discussion

The results of two studies provide evidence for a positivity effect in the agent evaluation process, whereby consumers consider their own previously loved (compared to hated) alternatives to be more informative to agents about their tastes, and hence more useful as a basis for future agent advice. Further, we show that this positivity effect is moderated by the level of agent agreement, such that it emerges when the consumer and the agent agree but is attenuated when they disagree. The results were also consistent with an accessibility-based mechanism for the positivity effect. Participants made quicker choices when faced with individuals with whom they agreed on loves compared hates, and also evaluated these individuals as better able to act as their agents. We also ruled out several alternative explanations for the positivity effect, based on the relative frequencies of loves and hates in the evaluation set, and in the population. Notably, our results were consistent across evaluation and choice tasks, across stimulus- and memory-based evaluations, and across two different product categories.

Our results make important theoretical contributions to the literature on word-of-mouth communications, which has generally found that negative word of mouth information is perceived as more diagnostic than positive (Herr et al., 1991; Wright, 1974). In contrast, we show that the negativity effect in word-of-mouth may depend on the object of evaluation. Specifically, negative information may be weighted more heavily for evaluation of products (Folkes and Kamins, 1999; Herr et al., 1991), but positive information may be weighted more heavily for evaluation of prospective agents. Furthermore, we identify a key moderator of this positivity effect, namely the agent's level of agreement with the consumer, and present evidence for an accessibility-based mechanism underlying the positivity effect in agent evaluation. It is worth noting that our results are consistent with at least two related streams of research. Specifically, research on the optimism bias suggests that people overestimate the extent to which "what I like is good," and "people are like me" (Taylor and Brown, 1988). Similarly, in our research, we found that respondents focused more on their loves, and assumed that others in the population shared their loves. Our findings also parallel research on judgment of covariations, where it has been noted that people tend to overweigh the positive-positive cell in 2×2 contingency tables (Crocker, 1982; Gershoff et al., 2001).

More broadly, our studies fit into a larger framework of research that explores asymmetries between positive and negative stimuli, and the conditions under which each is likely to be dominant (Baumeister et al., 2001). For example, Ito and Cacioppo (2005) demonstrate both a positivity offset in which individuals show stronger motivational responses to positive compared to negative information at low levels of evaluative input, and a negativity bias, in which individuals have more intense responses to increases in negative evaluative input. The underlying theme in this area of research is that the emergence of positivity or negativity effects depends on the relative diagnosticity of positive or negative stimuli which, in turn, may be influenced by a range of factors including motivations, task characteristics, product familiarity, and heterogeneity in the product category (Ahluwalia, 2002; Folkes and Kamins, 1999; Folkes and Patrick, 2003; Herr et al., 1991; Skowronski and Carlston, 1987).

Future research should continue to explore moderating factors that determine when positive or negative information will be more dominant in judgment and choice. For example, our research focused on hedonic products such as wall posters and movies. In the case of hedonic products, the positive area of the preference structure is likely to be richer than

the negative area because consumers focus on positive aspects of hedonic products, biasing their search and learning in favor of attributes that drive their loves. However in other product categories, consumers may tend to focus on negative aspects of the product. For example, research suggests that consumers are motivated to avoid learning costs associated with adopting innovative products (Mukherjee and Hoyer, 2001). Hence it is possible that the positivity effect obtained in the present research will be replaced by a negativity effect in the case of agents recommending new products. Additionally, research on emotional tradeoffs in choice (e.g., Luce, 1998) suggests that when individuals are forced to make high-stakes, emotionally loaded decisions such as choosing between medical providers, they may consider negative aspects of the choices more diagnostic than positive aspects, implying a reversal of the positivity effect in agent evaluation.

The number of attributes associated with an alternative may influence the positivity effect in agent evaluation. Rich, configural products such as movies and artwork may be evaluated on a large number of attributes, and are thus likely to differ in individuals' ability to access positive versus negative information about a given alternative. Simpler products that contain only a few attributes may not differ to the same degree. Thus the positivity effect may be attenuated for products with fewer as compared to a greater number of attributes. Likewise, the positivity effect may be attenuated for experts, who are likely to be motivated to learn about an entire product category rather than develop knowledge only about alternatives they prefer. Thus experts, compared to novices, may show less positivity effect when evaluating prospective agents.

The nature of the relationship between a prospective agent and a consumer may also influence the positivity effect. In the present research, we examined one-time evaluations of a previously unknown prospective agent, based on a limited number of revealed evaluations. Such evaluations are quite common in real life, for example, when consumer rely on salespeople they have just met, or internet posters with a limited rating history. In other situations, however, such as exchanging opinions with a friend or a clerk at a favorite store, consumers have the opportunity to interact with an agent over a more extended period of time (Gershoff et al., 2001). Related research indicates that negative instances of ability, compared to positive instances, are more influential than in damaging an advisor's reputation over extended interactions (Yaniv and Kleinberger, 2000), and that moderate levels of agreement are considered optimal in ongoing judgments of ability (cf. Jones and Wortman, 1973). These streams of research suggest that the dominance of love agreements over hate agreements may be attenuated over extended interactions with the agent.

In our studies, we proposed and tested an attribute ambiguity mechanism underlying the positivity effect by measuring reaction times to agent choice. Future research could perform a more direct test of this mechanism by manipulating attribute accessibility through semantic priming, or cognitive elaboration of the reasons underlying loves and hates. Future research could also investigate other mechanisms that could potentially drive the positivity effect in agent evaluation. For example, it could be argued that loves are more similar in their underlying attribute ratings than hates, and hence agreements on loves are more informative about the underlying attribute structure than agreements on hates. This mechanism could be tested in future research by asking participants to rate the similarity of groups of loved versus hated alternatives. If the attribute structure of loves is more homogenous than that of hates, then participants should be more likely to rate loved set as being more similar than hated sets. Finally, our research has implications for marketers who seek to convince consumers that their recommendations deserve to be trusted. Our results suggest that to gain consumers' confidence in their ability to make accurate recommendations, marketers should seek to match on alternatives that the consumer loves, rather than on alternatives the consumer

Appendix A

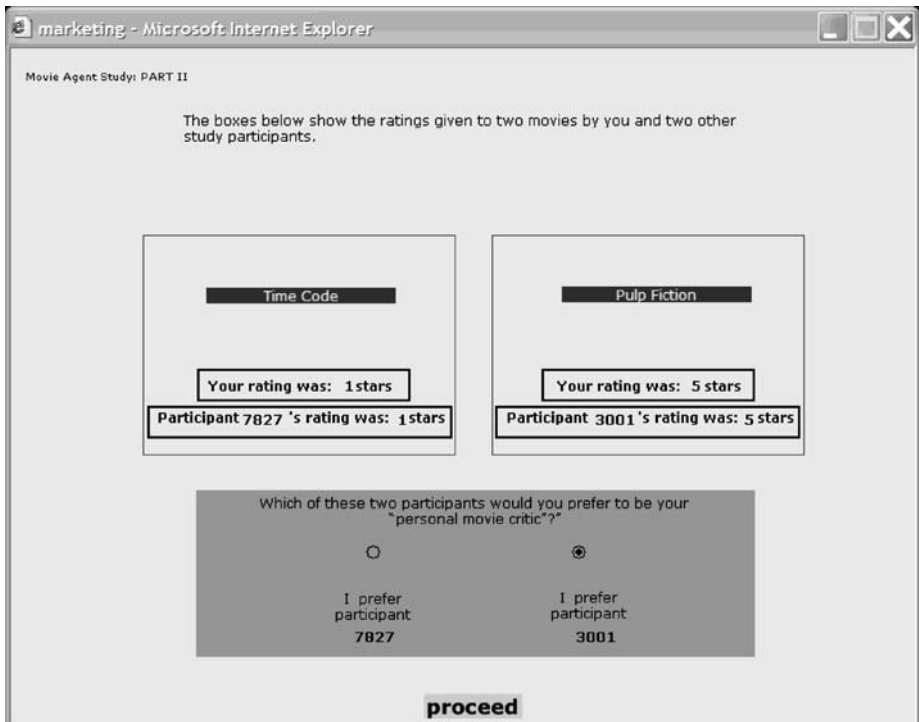
Study 2: Agent choices

Choice number	First prospective agent		Second prospective agent	
	Subject's own rating of movie	Prospective agent's rating of movie	Subject's own rating of movie	Prospective agent's rating of movie
1	1 star	1 star	5 star	5 stars
2	1 star	5 star	5 star	1 stars
3	1 star	1 star	1 stars	5 star
4	1 star	1 star	5 stars	1 stars
5	5 star	5 star	1 stars	5 stars
6	5 star	5 star	5 stars	1 star

Note: Every participant made six agent choices, each between two unique individuals. Each row in the table represents a choice that participants made. For each of the two agents in every choice, a different movie name was provided along with the participant's own rating and the prospective agent's rating of the respective movie. Choices were randomly counterbalanced to control for order effects.

Appendix B

Study 2: Sample agent choice task



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