

## Consumer Acceptance of Online Agent Advice: Extremity and Positivity Effects

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Consumers often search the Internet for agent advice when making decisions about products and services. Existing research on this topic suggests that past opinion agreement between the consumer and an agent is an important cue in consumers' acceptance of current agent advice. In this article, we report the results of two experiments which show that different types of past agreements can have different effects on the acceptance of current agent advice. In Study 1, we show that in addition to the overall agreement rate, consumers pay special attention to extreme opinion agreement when assessing agent diagnosticity (i.e., extremity effect). In Study 2 we show that positive extreme agreement is more influential than negative extreme agreement when advice valence is positive, but the converse does not hold when advice valence is negative (i.e., positivity effect). We conclude by identifying promising avenues for future research and discuss implications of the results for marketers in areas such as design of intelligent online recommendation systems and word-of-mouth management on the Internet.

Prior to making choices among products and services, consumers often go online to consider the advice of agents, who may be either professional critics (e.g., citysearch.com) or laypeople (e.g., all-reviews.com). As an information source, the Internet has vastly expanded the scope of pre-purchase information search by providing easy access to the advice of literally thousands of other individuals. For example, Web sites such as consumerreview.com and opinions.com have an ever-expanding database of ratings provided by actual consumers, in categories ranging from arts and entertainment to beauty care products. Such proliferation of information in the online environment creates an important problem for consumers, namely that different agents often provide contradictory advice (Gershoff, Broniarczyk, & West, 2001; West &

Broniarczyk, 1998). An interesting question in this context is, How do consumers evaluate and choose among conflicting agents to make their own product judgments and decisions?

Consumers may deal with the problem of conflicting agent advice by focusing on a subset of agents, who are considered more informative or diagnostic (e.g., Ganzach, 1994). Previous research has explored several ways in which consumers can assess the diagnosticity of an information source. One stream of research has investigated the role of agent characteristics, such as physical appearance and domain expertise (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Feick & Higie, 1992; Price, Feick, & Higie, 1989). Other researchers have examined factors related to agents' prior opinions that may affect agent diagnosticity. For example, it has been shown that agents with greater variance in past opinions are considered more diagnostic than those with a more uniform pattern of opinions (West & Broniarczyk, 1998) and advice that is inconsistent with past opinions is considered more diagnostic

than consistent advice (d'Astous & Touil, 1999). A third area of research has looked at the joint effect of past opinions of the agent and those of the consumer on acceptance of current agent advice. For example, Yaniv and Kleinberger (2000) examined the process through which individuals combine their own estimates with those of advice providers to arrive at a net evaluation. Across these research streams, a key general finding has been that the overall agreement rate of past opinions of the agent and those of the target consumer is an important determinant of agent diagnosticity and hence the acceptance of current agent advice (Cooke, Sujan, Sujan, & Weitz, 2002; Gershoff et al., 2001; Lydon, Jamieson, & Zanna, 1988).

In the present article, we extend this latter finding by showing that not all past agreements between an agent and a consumer are given equal weight in the consumer's assessment of the agent. In Study 1, we use a theoretical approach based on the determinants of diagnosticity to show that in addition to overall agreement, individuals pay special attention to past agreement on extreme ratings when deciding whether to accept the agent's current advice (i.e., extremity effect). In Study 2, based on theory and three pilot studies indicating that positive and negative areas of the preference structure differ in their relative diagnosticity, we show an asymmetry in the effects of positive and negative extreme opinion agreement on acceptance of agent advice. Specifically, we show that prior positive extreme agreement (compared prior negative extreme agreement) increases the acceptance of positively valenced agent advice, but the converse is not true for negatively valenced agent advice (i.e., positivity effect). We conclude by identifying implications of the results for theory and practice and by providing directions for future research.

## STUDY 1: THEORY

### Overall Opinion Agreement

Information about prior opinions of agents is readily available to consumers in an online environment (see Appendix A). For example, the Web site *citysearch.com* provides critics' reports that list ratings of movies from a number of professional sources. Similar lists of movie ratings provided by both professionals and nonprofessionals can be found at numerous sites including *reelmoviecritic.com*, *all-reviews.com*, and *epinions.com*. After accessing agent opinions on the Internet, consumers can compare past opinions of the agent with their own opinions to compute various indices of opinion similarity. One such index is the overall percentage of agreements between the consumer and the agent. For example, a consumer would have a 75% overall agreement rate with the movie critic Roger Ebert if her ratings were identical to Ebert's for 30 out of 40 movies that they have both seen.

Past research indicates that overall agreement on prior opinions is likely to have a positive effect on the acceptance of current agent advice. For example, overall agreement of

dichotomous (good vs. bad) ratings has been shown to have a positive effect on agent selection (Gershoff et al., 2001). Similarly, research in the area of interpersonal judgment has shown that overall similarity of past opinions has a positive effect on likeability and credibility judgments (e.g., Lydon, Jamieson, & Zanna, 1988; Lynch, Marmorstein, & Weigold, 1988). Finally, it has been found that individuals automatically abstract out overall frequency counts from raw tabular data (Alba, Mela, Shimp, & Urbany, 1999; Hasher & Zacks, 1984). Thus, individuals may automatically encode the overall frequency of agreement, and the resulting high availability of the overall agreement rate may encourage its use as a cue in making judgments about the agent (see Feldman & Lynch, 1988; West, 1996).

### Extreme Opinion Agreement

A key assumption in previous research has been that individuals weigh every past opinion equally when assessing agreement between themselves and the agent. However, we propose that individuals pay special attention to agreement on their extreme past opinions—that is, past opinions that were either highly positive or highly negative. For example, in terms of the earlier illustration, the consumer may have had extreme evaluations (e.g., one or five stars on a five-star evaluation scale) for 4 out of the 30 movies where she and Ebert agreed. A second consumer may have agreed with Ebert an equal number of times (30/40) overall but may not have agreed on any movies that were given extreme evaluations. Although both these consumers have an equal overall past agreement rate, they differ on extreme agreement and hence may differ in their assessment of how useful Roger Ebert is as a source of advice for movies to see in the coming weekend.

Several streams of research indicate that extreme opinion agreement may constitute uniquely informative data for making judgments about agent diagnosticity. The goal-based emotion literature indicates that high intensity (i.e., extreme) affective reactions are generated only when goals that are very important to the individual are implicated (e.g., Folkman & Lazarus, 1984; Lazarus, 1982). Thus, extreme evaluations expressed by a consumer about a product or service are an indicator that important goals and standards in the consumer's preference structure have been implicated. If so, then agreement on extreme alternatives is likely to be considered a particularly important index of similarity of the preference structures of the agent and the consumer. This conclusion is also supported by research on social categorization, which suggests that extreme cues may be perceived as less ambiguous (Reeder & Brewer, 1979; Reeder, Henderson, & Sullivan, 1982) and more diagnostic (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989) than cues of moderate strength. Other research suggests that most judgments (e.g., like/dislike) imply a range of possible values and that the width of this range reflects the level of ambiguity of the judgment (see Birnbaum, 1972; Wyer, 1974). Because extreme scale

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