

Negativity is contagious, study finds

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Though we may not care to admit it, what other people think about something can affect what we think about it. This is how critics become influential and why our parents' opinions about our life choices continue to matter, long after we've moved out. But what kind of opinions have the most effect? An important new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* reveals that negative opinions cause the greatest attitude shifts, not just from good to bad, but also from bad to worse.

"Consumer attitudes toward products and services are frequently influenced by others around them. Social networks, such as those found on Myspace and Facebook suggest that these influences will continue to be significant drivers of individual consumer attitudes as society becomes more inter-connected," explain Adam Duhachek, Shuoyang Zhang, and Shanker Krishnan (all of Indiana University). "Our research seeks to understand the conditions where group influence is strongest."

Consumers were presented with information about a new product and allowed to independently form their evaluations. As would be normally expected with many products, some of these evaluations were positive and others negative. The researchers then revealed to participants whether their peers evaluated the product negatively or positively. They found that the opinions of others exert especially strong influence on individual attitudes when these opinions are negative. Additionally, consumers that privately held positive attitudes toward the product were more susceptible to influence from group opinion than those who initially held negative opinions.

Furthermore, the researchers also found that those with negative opinions of the product were likely to become even more negative if asked to participate in a group discussion: “When consumers expect to interact with other consumers through these forums, learning the views of these other consumers may reinforce and even polarize their opinions, making them more negative,” the researchers reveal.

“This research has several interesting implications. First, given the strong influence of negative information, marketers may need to expend extra resources to counter-act the effects of negative word of mouth in online chatrooms, blogs and in offline media. Conversely, companies could damage the reputations of competitors by disseminating negative information online,” the researchers explain. “Consumers should be aware that these social influence biases exist and are capable of significantly impacting their perceptions.”

Source: University of Chicago

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