



CHICAGO JOURNALS

Journal of Consumer Research, Inc.

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (June 2003), pp. 125-137

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/374693>

Accessed: 15/06/2012 13:47

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The Positivity Effect in Perceptions of Services: Seen One, Seen Them All?

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A series of studies show converging evidence of a positivity effect in consumers' inferences about service providers. When the consumer has little experience with a service, positive information about a single employee leads to inferences that the firm's other service providers are similarly positive to a greater extent than negative information leads to inferences that the firm's other service providers are similarly negative. Four studies were conducted that varied in the amount of information about the service provider, the firm, and the service. The positivity effect was supported despite differences across studies in methods as well as measures.

The growth of the service sector has called attention to the importance of research examining consumers' perceptions of service providers (e.g., Shugan 1994). Service experiences are systematically different from those with products, partly because services are more heterogeneous (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985). For many mass-produced goods, consumers can infer from experience with one article of merchandise that others of the same make and model will be similar because of the lack of heterogeneity. If one item has desirable attributes, the consumer can expect others of the same make and model to possess the same desirable attributes.

It is unclear whether consumers assume the same degree of similarity among service providers. Service performance is inherently more variable than product performance, making service performance less predictable than product performance. As a consequence, reliability (variance across service performance) is more important for satisfaction with services than for products, both across industries and firms (Johnson and Nilsson, 2003).

Variability occurs because people are unique. Consumers' coproduction of the service experience with the service provider increases variability (cf. the servuction system model; Langeard et al. 1981). Those sources of variability increase the likelihood of differences between the customer's transaction-specific evaluation and the customer's more general brand evaluation (Johnson, Ander-

son, and Fornell 1995). Consumers may have learned to treat information about each service provider as limited to that unique transaction. If so, service firms should find creating brand images challenging.

Inferences from information differing in valence are also important to firms. Inferences from the individual employee to the firm's other employees can benefit a firm when the individual employee is perceived to have a positive attribute. When a consumer infers from a good experience with an individual service provider that others in the firm will also provide good service, the consumer is more likely to be loyal to the firm even if the individual service provider quits the firm. The word-of-mouth communications that the consumer relates may endorse the firm rather than just the individual service provider. On the other hand, inferences from an individual's negative attributes are more detrimental to a firm than inferences limited to the individual employee. When a consumer assumes that others in the firm will also possess negative attributes, the consumer is even less willing to patronize the firm in the future. The content of word-of-mouth communications is likely to be at the brand level. Such contrasting consequences underscore the importance of understanding factors that facilitate inferences from information about individual employees to the larger social entity—the firm's other employees.

The purpose of our studies is to examine the effect of positive or negative information about a single employee on perceptions of others providing the same type of service in the company (rather than to all employees of a company). Our investigation is guided by psychological research on social categorization, yet focuses on different issues. Our research investigates consumers' generalizations from information differing in valence when social groups are categorized as a brand. In contrast, psychologists typically explore such social categories as gender and race, which have

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different properties from service employees. For example, people perceive both occupational groups and groups of employees working for the same company as more coherent groups than gender groups (e.g., males; Lickel et al. 2000).

Previous research has investigated effects of information valence on inferences about products but not about services. As a general rule, negative information about a product's attributes influences brand perceptions more than positive information (e.g., Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991). In contrast to the negativity bias for products, we propose a positivity bias for services. Positive information about an individual service provider's characteristics leads the consumer to infer that the firm's other employees share those same positive characteristics to a greater extent than does negative information. In sum, our research contributes to the consumer behavior literature by identifying how valence, which is a fundamental dimension of consumption experience, differs for a major class of consumption experiences.

INFERENCES FROM INFORMATION VALENCE

Previous research shows that consumers weigh negative information about a product attribute more than positive information when forming their overall brand attitudes (Folkes and Kamins 1999; Herr et al. 1991). For example, upon hearing that another student's father had either a good or a bad experience with his car's reliability, students' impressions of that brand were influenced more by the negative than the positive word-of-mouth communication (Herr et al. 1991). That notion of a negativity bias is based on earlier work by psychologists on effects of information valence on perceptions of a person. Skowronski and Carlston (1989) concluded that an individual's negative behavior is more diagnostic of the individual's character for uncommon behaviors (e.g., cheating suggests that an individual is dishonest because honest behavior is more common). Similarly, Herr et al. (1991) concluded that negative information about an attribute permits categorization of a product as low quality more easily than does positive information since people perceive that products of any quality may possess positive or neutral features. Implicit in their thinking about negative information is that experience with one product is likely to be the same as for others of the same make and model due to product homogeneity (e.g., cars are mass produced). Hence, information about one product is predictive of brand experience.

Inferences about Service Providers

The greater heterogeneity of the service experience calls into question whether consumers' inferences exhibit the same pattern. One possibility is that the greater heterogeneity inhibits consumers from any inferences that the firm's other service providers will behave similar to an individual provider. However, research suggests that people readily generalize from a sample of one person to other group members (e.g., Kahneman and Miller 1986).

Another possibility is that consumers show the same negativity bias toward services as they do for products. Although products perform overall better than services, both product and service performance is generally positive (Fornell et al. 1996; Johnson et al. 1995). Just as products have positive or neutral attributes more than negative attributes (Herr et al. 1991), service providers generally behave in positive or neutral ways more than in negative ways. Hence, negative information about a particular firm's service suggests that their service can be categorized as low quality more than does positive information. For example, a survey of customers' experiences at fast-food restaurants that shows slower service for one restaurant chain should be weighed more heavily when forming an overall impression of that chain than a survey showing faster response for another fast-food chain. In short, when consumers have access to credible information aggregated across many service providers, consumers seem likely to show a negativity effect on perceptions of the firm's service providers just as they do for products.

Without such information, consumers—and those inexperienced with a service in particular—may not show the same negativity effect that they do with products. Inferences based on negative information about an individual service provider might have less effect on impressions of the firm's other service providers than inferences based on positive information—a positivity effect. For example, novice insurance purchasers may infer from an Allstate insurance agent who offers a free snack to a visitor to his office that the agent is friendly and that other Allstate agents would also be friendly. Conversely, novice insurance purchasers may infer from an Allstate insurance agent who ignores a visitor to his office that the agent is unfriendly but may be reluctant to infer that other Allstate agents would also be unfriendly.

That asymmetry should occur because an individual service provider's negative behavior is no longer diagnostic of the firm. Similar to consumers' beliefs about products (Herr et al. 1991), people are likely to believe that service providers display positive or neutral behavior more than negative behavior. That belief would be consistent with large-scale surveys, which generally show a high level of satisfaction with services (and products; Fornell et al. 1996). The expectation that service providers behave positively facilitates using information that an individual service provider behaves positively to make inferences about impressions of the firm. The expectation that service providers behave positively is inconsistent with the individual who behaves negatively. Heterogeneity across people facilitates dismissing the negative individual as an outlier from the larger group (the firm's other service providers). Hence, an individual's negative behavior is less likely to be perceived as typical or characteristic of the firm's other service providers than is positive behavior. In sum, there is a positivity effect for services.

H1: The valence of information about an individual service provider influences perceptions of the

firm differently. Information that an individual service provider has behaved positively is more likely to lead to inferences that the firm's other service providers will also behave positively than information that an individual service provider has behaved negatively leads to inferences that the firm's other service providers will also behave negatively.

Overview of the Research Strategy

Four studies examined the effects of positive and negative impressions of individual service providers on perceptions of the firm's other service providers. The studies varied in method and in the amount of information about the individual service provider, the firm's other service providers, and the service in general (e.g., information about an individual insurance agent, the firm's other agents, and insurance agents in general). Study 1 manipulated information valence in a role-playing experiment. Subjects who had little firsthand experience with a particular type of service were given positive or negative information about an individual service provider's behavior and asked about their inferences about the firm. The second experiment also asked subjects to make judgments about the firm when the valence of the individual service provider's behavior varied. Additionally, subjects received information about service providers employed by other firms. Study 3 examined perceptions when participants had much more information about the service provider, the firm, and the service in general. We used a critical incident methodology to compare perceptions of typicality of individual service providers who behaved positively and negatively across many services and firms. Study 4 participants' information about individual service providers was drawn from nonlaboratory, face-to-face interactions and so was much richer than in the two laboratory experiments. We related perceptions of positively behaving service providers to other service providers in the firm for those with varying amounts of experience with that type of service.

STUDY 1

Study 1 examined whether an individual service provider who behaves positively is perceived as more similar to the firm subgroup than an individual service provider who behaves negatively. We manipulated the valence of information about a service provider's behavior and about a service provider's trait for an unfamiliar service. The effect of the information valence was examined by comparing impressions of the individual to those of the firm's service providers.

As a control, we also compared those firm impressions to impressions of that same type of service provider across firms (i.e., the occupation). Studies of effects of informational valence on products have not investigated perceptions of the product class, only the brand. For example,

in the Herr et al. (1991) car study mentioned earlier, effects of the information on perceptions of cars in general (the superordinate group) were not measured. If consumers have global beliefs that service providers behave positively more than negatively, then those expectations also are likely to influence perceptions of specific occupations. For example, even if students had never met an insurance agent, general expectations for service providers should lead students to expect positive behavior more than negative behavior from insurance agents. However, positive information about an individual service provider should influence perceptions of the firm's other service providers more than it influences perceptions of those in the occupation in general. A subgroup member (the individual service provider) by definition has more in common with the subgroup (the firm) than the superordinate group (the occupation). It also follows that if consumers do not use information about a subgroup member to make inferences about an unfamiliar subgroup, consumers will perceive the subgroup as similar to the superordinate group.

Method

The study manipulated information about the valence of behavior displayed by the individual (positive behavior vs. negative behavior) and expectancies about the valence of the individual's trait (positive expectancy, negative expectancy, no expectancy control) as between-subjects factors. The target of the trait rating was a within-subjects variable (individual service provider, firm subgroup, superordinate occupational group). Subjects were 181 undergraduates who participated for course credit. They completed one of six versions of a questionnaire.

Independent Variables. All subjects were asked to imagine they "need to purchase automobile insurance and are interested in purchasing it from a certain company. You decide to go to the most convenient office to look into that company's insurance." Our research assumes that consumers expect service encounters to be positive more than negative, just as they do for products. That general belief should make consumers particularly susceptible to a positivity bias when they lack firsthand experience on which to base their inferences.

Insurance agents were used as stimuli because pretests indicated students had little personal experience with them and so would have few exemplars to guide their inferences. Our subjects' limited experience with agents may not have been that positive. The auto insurance industry does not target young drivers because they are an unprofitable, high-risk market for insurance (Larson 1995). Additionally, the university is located in an urban area with high insurance rates. Hence, it is questionable whether a positivity bias in perceptions of a firm would emerge merely because consumers have a positive predisposition toward car insurance agents.

Products are conceived of in terms of concrete attributes whereas people are conceived of in terms of traits. To ma-

nipulate trait valence, the scenario stated that a friend gave them information about the service provider before they went to the office. About a third of the subjects read that the friend told them the particular insurance agent in that office was friendly ($n = 62$), about another third were told the agent was unfriendly ($n = 59$), and the remainder were given no trait information as a control ($n = 60$).

Friendliness was selected as the trait to be manipulated partly because pretesting indicated it is an important attribute for auto insurance agents, but not the most important attribute. Also, it is not subject to negativity biases in impressions of the individual (Trafimow and Trafimow 1999). Friendliness is “symmetrical with regard to how easily different trait expectancies are disconfirmed by behavior. For example, if someone believes a target to be friendly, occasional unfriendly behaviors are still tolerated. Similarly, an unfriendly person may be expected to act friendly at times” (p. 686). That symmetry in perceptions of friendliness was anticipated to facilitate detection of any biases in generalization to the firm subgroup.

Our theorizing depends on positive expectations about service providers more generally rather than specific stereotypes that agents are friendly. To examine student perceptions, we asked 31 students to write down the characteristics of automobile insurance agents. Only 10% of subjects (three) described auto insurance agents as friendly. Those results suggest that students do not have a strongly held stereotype that agents are friendly.

The behavior manipulation involved information about the individual agent’s behavior on first encountering the customer. Subjects were told, “when you walk into the office, the agent is on the phone.” The positively behaving agent “pauses in his conversation, smiles and makes a point to offer you a cup of coffee and a cookie” ($n = 89$), whereas the negatively behaving agent “makes a point to turn his back to you and ignore you” ($n = 92$).

Manipulation Tests. A pretest was conducted with a different group of 24 students to confirm that the service provider’s actions (feeding vs. ignoring) were perceived as behavioral manifestations of the friendliness trait. Half the subjects were told to suppose they walked into the office of an insurance agent and encountered the positive behavior described in the main experiment. The other half read the scenario that described the negative behavior. Similar to Ybarra and Stephan (1996), all were asked, “Is this behavior consistent with being a friendly person?” and second, if it was “consistent with being an unfriendly person” (1 = not at all, 9 = definitely is; consistency index $r = -.84$). Those exposed to the positive behavior perceived it as more consistent with being a friendly person than did those exposed to the negative behavior ($M = 7.67$ vs. 1.25, respectively, $t(22) = 16.95$, $p < .001$). Those exposed to the negative behavior perceived it as more consistent with being an unfriendly person than did those exposed to the positive behavior ($M = 7.58$ vs. 2.42, respectively, $t(22) = 7.34$, $p < .001$).

A separate pretest was conducted with 26 students to

confirm that the behaviors were perceived as different in valence and similar in normativeness for an insurance agent. Half the subjects were exposed to each behavior. Subjects indicated whether the behavior was typical and was expected (1 = not at all, 9 = definitely is). As intended, both the positive and negative behaviors were perceived as somewhat atypical ($M = 4.23$ and 3.84, respectively, $t(24) = .45$, NS) and somewhat unexpected ($M = 4.00$ and 3.36, respectively, $t(24) = .76$, NS). Subjects also indicated whether the behavior was a “good thing to do” and whether it was a “bad thing to do” (1 = not at all, 9 = extremely). As intended, the positive behavior was considered a good behavior more than was the negative behavior ($M = 7.69$ vs. 2.00, respectively, $t(24) = 11.73$, $p < .001$). The negative behavior was considered a bad behavior more than was the positive behavior ($M = 7.08$ vs. 1.77, respectively, $t(24) = -11.17$, $p < .001$).

Rating Scale Items. Subjects in the main study responded to a series of items on nine-point scales. The first three items asked subjects to indicate the nature of their causal inferences for the agent’s behavior. Results for those items are not reported here. Next, the subjects were to provide their “impression of the kind of person the agent is.” They indicated on separate scales “is he a friendly/unfriendly person” (1 = not at all, 9 = definitely is). The two items were combined into a friendliness index ($r = -.85$). A 2×2 ANOVA of the ratings of the individual service provider’s friendliness suggest that the manipulations had the intended effects (i.e., no negativity effect in perceptions of the individual agent). An interaction for perceptions of the individual agent would have suggested that negative information was weighed more heavily than positive information in forming impressions of the individual service provider. Instead, there was only a significant behavior main effect and a significant expectancy main effect, $F(1, 175) = 220.17$, $p < .001$, and $F(2, 175) = 8.25$, $p < .001$ (see table 1). Those results serve as a manipulation check. Additionally, subjects were asked to “think about what other agents who work for that company would be like” and rate whether they were friendly and unfriendly ($r = -.74$), as well as whether automobile agents are friendly and unfriendly ($r = -.72$).

Results

Hypothesis 1 was tested using subjects’ friendliness ratings for the three target entities (individual service provider, the subgroup composed of the firm’s other service providers, the superordinate group of those in the same occupation) as a within-subjects factor. A $2 \times 3 \times 3$ ANOVA of the friendliness ratings revealed three significant main effects—for the behavior, the trait expectancy, and the target, respectively: $F(1, 174) = 93.71$, $p < .001$, $F(1, 174) = 4.46$, $p < .001$, and $F(1, 174) = 8.62$, $p < .001$. There were also two interactions—a significant valence by target interaction and a trait expectancy by target interaction, $F(1, 174) = 165.83$, $p < .001$, and $F(1, 170) = 11.21$, $p < .001$.

TABLE 1
MEAN FRIENDLINESS RATINGS FOR EACH TARGET IN STUDY 1

	Service provider	Firm subgroup	Occupational superordinate	N
Positive behavior	6.61 ^{1,a}	6.05 ^{1,b}	5.62 ^c	89
Positive expectancy	7.00	6.05	5.63	30
No expectancy	6.97	6.32	5.90	29
Negative expectancy	5.88	5.78	5.47	30
Negative behavior	3.56 ^{2,a}	5.11 ^{2,b}	5.32 ^b	92
Positive expectancy	3.91	5.16	5.45	32
No expectancy	3.65	5.28	5.17	30
Negative expectancy	3.10	4.83	5.35	30
Positive expectancy	5.42 ³	5.62	5.52	62
No expectancy	5.31	5.80	5.53	59
Negative expectancy	4.47 ^{4,a}	5.30 ^b	5.41 ^b	60

NOTE.—Pairs of means with differently lettered superscripts in the same row are significantly different, $p < .05$. Pairs of means with superscripts 1 and 2 in the same column are significantly different, $p < .05$. Pairs of means with superscripts 3 and 4 in the same column are significantly different, $p < .05$.

.001. The two-way interactions support the positivity hypothesis. Information about the individual’s behavior influenced friendliness ratings differently depending on the target of evaluation. Contrasts show that individuals who behaved negatively elicited more negative perceptions of the individual’s friendliness than individuals who behaved positively (the manipulation check shown in table 1). As predicted, contrasts also show that information about a positively behaving individual lead to more positive evaluations of the firm subgroup than did information about a negatively behaving individual (table 1). A nonsignificant contrast indicates that differently valenced information about the individual did not influence perceptions of the occupation’s friendliness. Hence, perceptions of the occupation’s friendliness can serve as a baseline to compare valence effects on perceptions of the firm subgroup.

Comparisons within the positive behavior conditions reveal significant differences between perceptions of the individual’s and the firm’s friendliness and between the individual and the occupation’s friendliness. The individual’s positive behavior was sufficiently informative that it was perceived as indicating a friendlier agent than was true of others employed by the firm and was true of others in that occupation. Moreover, the firm was perceived as significantly friendlier than the occupation (table 1), supporting hypothesis 1.

A different pattern emerged when the agent behaved negatively. Comparing only within the negative behavior conditions, there were significant differences between the individual and the firm’s friendliness and between the individual and the occupation’s friendliness (the same pattern as for positive behaviors; see table 1). The individual’s negative behavior was sufficiently informative that it was perceived as indicating a less friendly agent than was true of the occupation and the firm. However, perceptions of the firm and of others in the occupation did not differ, supporting hypothesis 1. That pattern suggests that the individual’s negative behavior did not influence perceptions of the firm.

Information about the individual service provider’s trait

(friendly vs. unfriendly) had less impact compared to information about the individual’s behavior, making interpretation of the results more ambiguous. The trait expectancy by target interaction is consistent with the notion that information valence has asymmetric effects. As with the effect of negative behavior, information about the agent’s negative trait influenced friendliness ratings differently depending on the target of evaluation (table 1). When the agent was an unfriendly person and behaved in a negative way, he was considered less friendly than others in the firm subgroup or others in the occupation. When expectancies about the individual service provider were positive, perceptions of each target did not differ.

Differences in Neutrality toward the Firm. Whereas the previous analysis uses perceptions of the occupation as a baseline to examine effects on firm perceptions, another way of testing for a positivity effect is to examine the extent to which the firm ratings differ from the midpoint. If we assume that the midpoint represents a neutral perception of friendliness or uncertainty about friendliness, then a positivity effect on perceptions of the firm’s other employees should lead to a greater mean distance from the midpoint when the individual service provider’s behavior is positive than when it is negative. To conduct this test, any negatively signed rating of the individual agent or the firm was changed to a positively signed rating.

A $2 \times 3 \times 2$ ANOVA of those transformed friendliness ratings revealed a significant target main effect and, supporting hypothesis 1, a target by valence of behavior interaction, $F(2, 175) = 62.29, p < .001$, and $F(2, 175) = 4.92, p < .05$, respectively. Consistent with hypothesis 1, information about the individual’s behavior influenced the firm’s friendliness ratings differently ($M = .68$ vs. 1.05 , for negative and positive behavior, respectively, $F(1, 179) = 5.93, p < .01$). Individuals who behaved negatively elicited more neutral perceptions of the firm’s friendliness than individuals who behaved positively. As intended, perceptions of the negatively and positively behaving individual service pro-

viders did not differ in distance from the midpoint ($M = 1.67$ vs. 1.61 , respectively, NS).

Discussion

The overall results support a positivity effect. Subjects used positive information about the individual to make inferences about the firm subgroup more than they used negative information. Neither the trait information nor the behavior information given to subjects influenced perceptions of the superordinate occupational group. Regardless of whether information about the individual service provider was negative or positive, friendliness ratings of the occupation did not differ. Further, friendliness ratings of the firm differed from those of the occupation only when the individual behaved positively, not when the individual behaved negatively (table 1). Hence, the positively behaving individual elevated perceptions of the firm's friendliness, but the negatively behaving individual had no effect on the firm's friendliness.

The analysis of the neutrality of the ratings also suggests a positivity effect on perceptions of firms when given information about the individual service provider. Subjects appear to draw stronger inferences about the firm's other employees when the individual behaves positively than when the individual behaves negatively. Yet, their inferences about the individual service provider are similarly strong.

Alternative Explanations. There is no evidence of subtyping of the firm and the individual. Weber and Crocker (1983) propose that deviant members of stereotyped groups are subtyped. If we assume that subjects held the stereotype that insurance agents are friendly (despite the pretest evidence), the negative behavior would be perceived as counterstereotypical. Weber and Crocker maintain that such a counterstereotypical person should be relegated to an atypical subgroup. Yet, subjects did not generalize from the individual's negative behavior to the firm (the salient subgroup). Instead, the negative agent seems to be perceived as atypical. Another reason why subtyping seems an unlikely explanation is due to the sample's inexperience with the occupation; familiarity with the category precedes the creation of subtypes (Taylor 1981).

Another way of interpreting the results is in terms of occupational stereotype consistency. Assuming that subjects held a specific stereotype that auto insurance agents are friendly, subjects might not have generalized from the negative information because the unfriendly agent behaved in a manner inconsistent with that stereotype. Perhaps subjects merely inferred that the firm's other service providers would behave in the same way as other agents in the same occupation. If occupational stereotypes dominate the impressions of the firm when the individual behaved negatively, it seems reasonable to also expect them to dominate impressions of the firm when the individual behaved positively. Yet, ratings of the firm's friendliness are significantly higher than those of the occupational superordinate group when the individual behaved positively (table 1).

Extremity of the individual's behavior also can be ruled out as an explanation for the results. The positive and negative behaviors were both perceived as somewhat unexpected in the pretest. Additionally, subjects perceived the agent who behaved negatively to be as unfriendly a person in the trait ratings as the agent who behaved positively was considered friendly.

Another concern might be that asking about the firm before the occupation led to a stronger relationship between perceptions of the individual and the firm than between the individual and the occupation. However, when the individual behaved negatively, perceptions of the firm and occupation did not differ. Hence, that question order does not necessarily lead to greater similarity between individual and firm than between individual and occupation.

In sum, study 1 results suggest that consumers are more likely to generalize from positive than from negative information about the individual service provider to the firm's other service providers when they have little information about the firm and the occupation. Perhaps if they had some concrete information about other agents in the occupation, subjects' subgroup impressions would not have been influenced by positive information about the individual. A more direct test of the effect of information about the individual as opposed to information about the superordinate group on beliefs about the firm's agents would help to clarify effects of valence of the individual's behavior. Study 2 provides such a comparison.

STUDY 2

Study 2 replicated the valence effect found in study 1 for consumers inexperienced with a service using different measures and a different method. We compared the effect of information about the individual service provider to information about others not employed by the firm. The information about others in the occupation made the performance of the individual service provider appear either better (more positive) or worse (more negative) than the others. Subjects could infer that those in the firm would behave similarly to an individual service provider or to others in the occupation. Expectations that service providers in general behave positively should influence inferences so that the valence of behavior affects subjects' predictions. Consumers should infer that the firm's other service employees will behave in the same way as a positively behaving individual to a greater extent than they will infer that other service employees will behave in the same way as a negatively behaving individual (hypothesis 1).

Method

The design varied the agent's behavior (positive vs. negative) in a between-subjects design. Subjects were 57 undergraduates (21 males, 36 females) who completed a questionnaire asking about home insurance agents. Home insurance agents were selected as the service providers because of low familiarity with that service. Undergraduates

are not the target market for home insurance and are unlikely to pay attention to information about that industry. As to norms about the specific service, a national survey of customer satisfaction across various industries found a level of satisfaction with property insurance slightly higher than the overall average for services (Fornell et al. 1996). Those findings suggest that American adults do not single out the home insurance industry as providing abnormally positive or negative experiences.

The questionnaire briefly described the home insurance industry and its employment of individual agents that provide customers with quotes for various types of house insurance. It noted "typically the customer has to obtain insurance before being able to close the deal on his/her new home. The agent calls the customer back after he or she has had some time to generate a quote." The questionnaire described the occupation in a way so that subjects would not assume that the company imposed uniform procedures and would not imply a uniform response time. They were told "each agent develops his or her own procedures for generating quotes. They have their own preferences for the databases to use to generate a quote."

Whereas study 1 examined generalizations about trait inferences based on the agent's behavior (i.e., friendliness), study 2 examined generalizations about the behavior itself (i.e., the responsiveness of the agent). The agent responded quickly or slowly to the customer's request for a quote. Research indicates that responsiveness is an important dimension on which service providers are evaluated (Parasuraman et al. 1985). However, subjects' lack of familiarity with the service made it unlikely that they would know the amount of time it takes for an agent to respond to a request for a quote.

In all conditions the agent's response time was the same (48 hours). Only the time of those agents employed by other companies differed; they were either 24 hours earlier (responded in 24 hours) or were 24 hours later (responded in 72 hours). Hence, the agent's behavior was more negative when other agents responded earlier ($n = 29$) and was more positive when other agents responded later ($n = 28$). For example, in the negative behavior condition, "two of the agents responded with a quote in 24 hours (one day)," whereas in the positive behavior condition, "two of the agents responded with a quote in 72 hours (three days)." (Consistent with the notion that the positivity bias is more likely for inexperienced consumers, we gave information about only a few others in the occupation rather than giving norms.) Information about those two competing agents' response times preceded information about the third agent's response time.

Following the description of the agent's behavior, subjects were asked to estimate in hours how long it typically takes other home insurance agents who work for the same company to get back to customers with a quote. Then, as a manipulation check on valence, subjects were asked whether the individual agent's service was fast or slow (1 = slow, 9 = fast). As expected, the response was considered faster

when the other agents responded in 72 hours than when the other agents responded in 24 hours, $M = 7.07$ vs. 3.96 , $F(1, 55) = 74.97$, $p < .001$. Additionally, subjects indicated their impression of the individual agent (1 = negative, 9 = positive). The impression was more positive when the agent responded earlier than the other agents than when the agent responded later than the others, $M = 6.75$ vs. 5.07 , $F(1, 55) = 16.39$, $p < .001$.

Results

Analysis of variance was used to analyze the results. The primary measure of interest is the estimate of the response time of the firm's other agents. The results show a main effect for information about the other agents, $F(1, 55) = 13.20$, $p < .001$. When competing agents responded after the individual service provider, the firm's agents were predicted to respond later than when the competing agents responded earlier ($M = 50.61$ vs. 38.24 hours). Hence, subjects' estimates for the firm subgroup were influenced by information about those in the occupation as well as by information about the individual agent.

Hypothesis 1 predicts that subjects' estimates for the firm will be closer to the individual agent's response time when the individual agent responded positively than negatively. To test the hypothesis, we calculated the absolute value of the difference between each subject's estimate and 48 hours (the individual agent's response time). An ANOVA was performed on that measure. Hypothesis 1 predicts that subjects will estimate a longer time (a time closer to others in the occupation) when the individual agent responds later rather than earlier. When the agent responds early (behaves positively), subjects should estimate a time similar to the individual agent. The results are consistent with hypothesis 1. The ANOVA reveals a significant effect for response time, $F(1, 55) = 4.41$, $p < .05$. When the agent behaved positively (responded earlier), subjects' estimations for the firm's other agents were closer to the agent's time than when the agent behaved negatively (responded late). The mean absolute difference from 48 hours was 2.61 hours in the early condition compared to 9.76 hours in the late condition.

Discussion

Study 2 findings provide additional support for the positivity hypothesis (hypothesis 1). Subjects were asked to make inferences about the firm subgroup when given information about three individuals in the occupation. Subjects estimated that the firm subgroup would perform more similar to the individual agent when the agent behaved positively than when the agent behaved negatively. It appears that the slower individual agent was thought to be more of an outlier when subjects made inferences about the subgroup than was the quicker individual agent.

Alternatively, the two slower agents from other firms were perceived as outliers more than were the two quicker agents from other firms. Subjects did not ignore information about two agents employed by competing firms when those others

behaved negatively (responded later) than when those others behaved positively (responded earlier). However, the results suggest that information about the individual service provider is considered more relevant to inferences about the firm than is information about other members of the occupation. Note that if subjects had evenhandedly used the information about the three service providers' response times to generate brand norms, the absolute difference in the response estimates from 48 hours should have been 16 hours. Yet, mean estimates were less than 10 hours. That finding suggests a general tendency for information about a single subgroup member to be more influential in inferences about the subgroup than is information about other superordinate group members, even when the superordinate members outnumbered the firm's agent. Perhaps less weight was given to the other two incidences because a firm's employees are a cohesive type of group (Lickel et al. 2000).

Finding the same positivity effects using different measures and different procedures from study 1 provides more confidence in the rationale for hypothesis 1. Order of question items cannot explain positivity effects in study 2 since the measure of interest was posed first. Further, study 2 shows that the positivity effect is not limited to subjectively assessed traits inferred from performance but extends to objective performance measures such as time. Nor is the effect limited to expectations about emotional display rules (e.g., expectations that the service provider should behave in a friendly manner; Ashforth and Humphrey 1993). Study 2 also gave information about others in the occupation, providing a more straightforward baseline against which the impression of the firm can be compared than in study 1. Finally, the judgment task used in study 2 suggests that the valence effect is not due just to egocentric biases in evaluations of firms. Study 1's role-play methodology may have reflected subjects' beliefs that they would not even approach a firm that would hire unfriendly agents. In study 2, subjects were not asked to role-play but were simply asked to make judgments about the firm.

In sum, study 1's results were replicated using a different methodology and different measures. Nevertheless, both experiments involved questionnaire descriptions of insurance service providers and provided little information to subjects. Greater confidence that consumers' positive evaluations of individual service providers are similar to their evaluation of the firm would be gained if the effects were found in a more ecologically valid setting and for other types of services. Those concerns are addressed in studies 3 and 4.

STUDY 3

Study 3 investigated whether individuals that provide poor service are perceived as less typical of the firm subgroup than are those who provide good service. Study 1 and study 2 suggest that consumers expect the firm's other agents to be more similar to the individual service provider who behaves positively than the individual service provider who behaves negatively. The assumption is that a service provider who behaves positively will be seen as more typical

of the firm subgroup than will a service provider who behaves negatively because service encounters in general are positive more than they are negative (Fornell et al. 1996; Johnson et al. 1995).

Study 3 used a critical incident methodology to compare the extent to which actual individual service providers who behaved positively and individual service providers who behaved negatively are perceived as typical of the firm subgroup. Whereas studies 1 and 2 minimized the amount of experience subjects had with the service, study 3 examined typicality perceptions regardless of experience. Consumers' beliefs that positive service encounters are more common than negative encounters can arise from three sources: general perceptions of services, beliefs specific to a firm, and beliefs specific to an occupation. Studies 1 and 2 suggest that the valence of information about an individual service provider influences perceptions of the firm when consumers have no firm-specific beliefs and have little or no experience with the occupation. As a consumer gains experience with a particular service, global beliefs about service providers can be supplanted with more specific norms about the firm and the occupation. Those beliefs may vary across firms and across occupations. For example, an airline passenger might learn from experience that one airline is friendlier than other airlines and so might consider an unfriendly flight attendant employed by that airline to be an outlier on the basis of those firm-specific norms. In contrast, the passenger might encounter employees at another airline that are consistently unfriendly and might then perceive that firm's friendly flight attendant as an outlier. Hence, the positivity effect may be stronger for consumers with less experience with the occupation than for those with more experience.

H2: Perceptions that the individual service provider who behaves positively is more typical of the firm's other service providers than are those who behave negatively are stronger for consumers who have experience with the occupation than for those with less experience.

Method

A questionnaire asking about good and bad experiences with services was given to 44 undergraduates as part of a course requirement. The design was within-subjects, with the order of service experience counterbalanced (about half the students described first a positive experience and then a negative experience, and the remaining students responded in the reverse order). Participants were asked to "try to recall the most recent occasion when a person provided you with service that was not extremely good/bad, but was just somewhat good/bad." (Incidents involving individuals providing extreme levels of service were precluded because, by definition, those service providers should be perceived as atypical.)

As a manipulation check, subjects were asked to indi-

cate, “did you have a positive or negative impression of the individual service provider” on a nine-point scale (1 = extremely negative, 9 = extremely positive). A within-subjects ANOVA showed that the somewhat positive individual was rated somewhat positively ($M = 6.25$) and the somewhat negative individual was rated somewhat negatively ($M = 3.41$), $F(1, 43) = 40.20$, $p < .001$. Participants were asked if the “person who provided the service was typical of other people in that same company or organization,” and if the “service was typical of the kind of service you would have received from other people employed by that same company or organization” (1 = definitely not typical, 9 = definitely typical). The two measures were combined into a subgroup typicality measure ($r = .90$ for the positive condition and $.95$ for the negative condition). They were also asked to describe the service (e.g., subjects mentioned restaurants, hairstylists, car repairs, travel services). Then, they were asked, “how much experience have you had with this type of service” (1 = almost none, 9 = a great deal; $M = 6.5$ for positive and 5.9 for negative, $F(1, 43) = 2.00$, $p < .20$). They were also asked whether they had prior experience with the particular firm (no, yes, don’t remember). For both conditions, about half of the subjects had not used the firm previously (46% in the negative condition and 48% in the positive condition). They were also asked, “how hard was it to think of that service experience” (1 = extremely easy, 9 = extremely difficult). The means indicate that both incidents were easy to think of ($M = 3.86$ for positive and 3.57 for negative). The majority of incidents (85%) happened within the past three months.

Results and Discussion

The results support the notion that valence influences perceived typicality, consistent with hypothesis 1. An analysis of covariance was conducted with the perceived typicality of each firm as a within-subjects variable and experience with each occupation as covariates. There was a main effect for valence, $F(1, 36) = 4.55$, $p < .05$, indicating that a positively behaving service provider was perceived as more typical of the firm than a negatively behaving service provider ($M = 5.59$ vs. 4.45). Further, experience with the occupation when the individual behaved positively was a significant covariate, $F(1, 36) = 3.87$, $p < .06$. However, other analyses do not support the notion that experience moderates the positivity effect. A regression shows that experience with the occupation when the encounter was positive does not significantly predict typicality in the positive condition, nor does experience with the occupation when the encounter was negative. Experience with the particular firm did not influence typicality, either.

It is unclear why experience does not seem to moderate typicality, but it may be partly due to the degree of methodological control in this more naturalistic study. For example, subjects’ estimates of their experience with a service may vary depending on how broadly they define the service (e.g., experience with a type of physician specialist could

be limited, whereas experience with physicians in general is more extensive). Study 3 measures make it difficult to identify subjects that have both little experience with the firm and little experience across other firms. That particular group should be most susceptible to the positivity bias compared to subjects who have a great deal of experience with both the firm and the occupation.

In sum, the positivity effect was found across many types of real life service experiences. Not surprisingly, increases in ecological validity with the critical incident methodology are accompanied by decreased methodological control, as compared to the two laboratory experiments. The effect of experience with the firm is not clear-cut. Additionally, studies 1, 2, and 3 do not indicate the potential strength of the associations between perceptions of the positively behaving service provider’s traits and trait perceptions of the firm’s other service providers in a naturalistic context. Study 4 provides evidence from actual service encounters for consumers with varying levels of firsthand experience, but controlled for the type of service.

STUDY 4

Study 4 examined the extent to which consumers’ positive experiences with an individual service provider are related to impressions of the brand subgroup in a naturalistic setting. Experiments 1 and 2 provide considerable control over variables but in somewhat artificial contexts. Although the results indicate a strong relationship between perceptions of the individual’s traits and those of the firm’s other service providers, greater confidence that positive information does indeed have such an effect would be gained from a more naturalistic design. If perceptions of the individual’s traits and other service providers employed by the firm are not highly related in a real-world setting, then the effect of a positive experience with the individual on firm perceptions may be trivial.

Effects of positive versus negative impressions of the individual were not compared in study 4. Instead, the study aimed to identify limitations on the extent of perceived similarity between a positively behaving service provider and the firm’s other service providers. Hence we tested only one aspect of hypothesis 2—that experience moderates the impact of positive perceptions of an individual service provider on the firm. When consumers have experience across many service providers in an occupation, they seem less likely to rely on general beliefs about the valence of service providers’ behaviors to guide their inferences about the firm.

Method

Participants were 60 car rental customers recruited in the departure areas of Los Angeles International airport (prior to 9/11/01). The questionnaire administrator preselected individuals who appeared to be 25–35 years of age. Younger drivers were sought because they were more likely to lack experience renting cars. The administrator screened participants by asking whether they had rented a car during their

trip. Those who had rented a car were given a questionnaire asking about the individual service provider at the counter who had handled the rental.

Impressions of car rental counter employees were examined to minimize memory biases by questioning consumers shortly after their interaction with the service provider. Further, stereotypes of that particular occupation were likely to be nonexistent or weak compared to other occupations (e.g., physicians). Also, the many brands of rental services diminishes the effect of any single brand on the results. Finally, car renters at a large airport are unlikely to have encountered the same service provider previously and are unlikely to expect to encounter the same person again. Hence, more experience with renting a car increases the number of different service providers encountered rather than increasing exposure to the same individual.

The participants were asked which brand of car rental they chose, the brands used previously, and the number of times they previously rented a car. Of the 60 renters, 42% ($n = 25$) reported having rented a car less than four times (inexperienced), and 58% ($n = 35$) reported having rented a car four or more times. The sample was then reduced to provide a more clear-cut test of the effect of having one experience with the brand and little with other brands compared to having several experiences with the brand as well as with other brands. Those who had rented a car from that particular company only once and had rented a car less than four times were considered inexperienced ($n = 13$). In contrast, the experienced subjects rented a car from the company four or more times, as well as renting from other companies ($n = 19$). Hence, we deleted subjects who repeatedly rented solely from one firm. Those brand-loyal renters probably have strong positive beliefs about the firm that might enhance their impressions of the individual service provider. That sort of positivity effect is not the focus of our research.

All renters responded to an open-ended question asking them to describe "when you were at the car rental location and the customer service representative at the counter helped you." Participants then indicated whether their impression of the service provider was positive or negative (1 = very negative, 7 = very positive). (Only four renters gave the service provider a rating below the midpoint, precluding a comparison of generalizations from positive vs. negative impressions of the individual.) They reported the efficiency of the individual service provider on two separate scales ("is he an efficient/inefficient person"; 1 = not at all, 7 = definitely is). The two items were combined into an efficiency index ($r = -.91$, $n = 32$). (Interviews with car rental personnel indicated that efficiency was an important trait on which car renters evaluated counter personnel.) To assess impressions of the firm subgroup, the renters were then asked, "if you were to use that same brand of car rental in the future, what do you think other service representatives that work at the counter of the same car rental company would be like?" followed by the same two rating scales ($r = -.79$). They were also asked about the occupation's efficiency ($r = -.56$).

Results and Discussion

The results for the trait ratings are consistent with the notion that inferences about an individual service provider's positive traits are similar to inferences about the subgroup's positive traits. A paired-sample *t*-test indicates that the mean difference between the ratings was not significant ($M = 4.59$ vs. 4.67 , $n = 32$), respectively. Regressions were used to test hypothesis 2, with an interaction between amount of experience and perceptions of the individual agent predicted to influence perceptions of the firm. A regression shows that perceptions of the individual service provider's efficiency, the subject's experience renting cars, and the interaction of the individual's efficiency and the subject's experience were predictors of perceptions of the firm's efficiency ($\beta = .19$, $t = 3.66$, $p < .001$; $\beta = -1.18$, $t = -12.67$, $p < .001$; and $\beta = 1.69$, $t = 17.5$, $p < .001$, respectively; $R^2 = .94$). Simple effects tests confirm that inexperienced users' impressions of the individual significantly predicted perceptions of the firm subgroup ($\beta = .94$, $t = 9.30$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .89$) but did not predict the experienced users' impressions ($\beta = -.01$, $t = -.04$, NS). Those results support the part of hypothesis 2 dealing with positive behaviors.

Despite the pattern of results that, at a minimum, suggests more commonality between individual and firm perceptions for inexperienced than for experienced consumers, the survey methodology has drawbacks that are commonly associated with increased ecological validity. Most important, the direction of causality is uncertain. An alternative explanation for the results is that subjects thought that all counter personnel were similarly efficient across firms and so perceived individual service providers and firms the same. If so, subjects' occupation ratings should influence their firm ratings. A regression shows that perceptions of the occupation's efficiency did influence experienced customers' perceptions of the firm subgroup's efficiency ($\beta = .45$, $t = 2.10$, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .25$). They seemed to have learned from experience that firms are similarly efficient. Occupation did not predict the inexperienced users' impressions of the firm subgroup ($\beta = .16$, $t = -.53$, NS), consistent with hypothesis 2.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The four studies presented here provide converging evidence for a positivity bias in inferences from a single service provider to the firm's other service providers. The positivity effect was supported using multiple methods and multiple measures (trait perceptions, time estimations, typicality judgments). Further, the studies varied the amount of information about the individual service provider, the firm subgroup, and others in the same occupation. The first two experiments provide more confident assertions about causality, whereas the more naturalistic studies offer less control but provide more assurance about ecological validity.

Service versus Product Valence Biases

Those studies identify a heretofore undetected difference between consumers' perceptions of products and services. The difference may arise from a widely acknowledged distinction between products and services—the degree of heterogeneity. Although heterogeneity is often emphasized as a distinguishing characteristic of services, its theoretical implications for consumers' perceptions have rarely been pursued. Our research shows that investigating such basic differences between products and services can inform consumer theories.

Examining effects of valence on perceptions of services illustrates how research on services can clarify the nature of the negativity bias in product judgments. We can distinguish between two types of negativity biases, a distinction applicable to products also. Our research investigates a positivity bias as a consequence of an individual service experience. The negativity bias for a product attribute refers to the tendency to evaluate the individual product more negatively when one of its attributes is negative. Herr et al. (1991) focused on that bias and found a negativity effect when consumers have aggregate information (e.g., from *Consumer Reports*) as well as when consumers have information from past experience. Their research also suggests a negativity bias for information about a single product experience. Information about an individual's product experience influences the overall brand evaluation more when it is negative than positive (Herr et al. 1991; Mizerski 1982). Negativity biases for product attributes and for product experiences have been tested only with mass-produced products that are likely to be perceived as homogenous. Hence, the distinction between product attribute and product experience negativity biases may have seemed superfluous.

The extent of perceived similarity between a single product with others of the same make and model is difficult to assess from prior studies. Some consumers may ignore a negatively performing, mass-produced product as a lemon, but there is little empirical evidence of that because subjects' evaluations of individual products are not compared to subjects' evaluations of the brand in a within-subjects design. Further, a negativity bias for product experiences is dependent on a negativity bias for product attributes.

Although heterogeneity can account for the different effect of valence for products and services, products can sometimes be heterogeneous and services homogenous. In fact, experts often urge marketing managers to reduce service heterogeneity by standardizing service encounters so that consumers' expectations can be more easily met. Success in doing so should have the undesirable effect for marketers of reducing the positivity effect. On the other hand, if heterogeneity accounts for valence differences between products and services, then the negativity effect for products may not occur for products that are more heterogeneous. Products and services may be a rather gross distinction that ignores the underlying heterogeneity dimension along which types of products and services can be ordered.

Bounds of the Service Positivity Effect

In addition to experience, other factors may decrease the extent of the service positivity effect. As noted previously, we have examined a positivity bias for experiences with services and in doing so, attempted to minimize valence biases for traits. Skowronski and Carlston (1989) have suggested that traits differ in the extent to which they are subject to valence biases. For example, honesty/dishonesty has negative valence effects for individuals, whereas friendliness/unfriendliness has no valence effects (Trafimow and Trafimow 1999). Positivity effects in firm judgments may be difficult to detect when there are trait valence effects. That difficulty is illustrated in a survey of consumers with a great deal of experience that showed a positivity effect for one type of behavior and a negativity effect for another in overall evaluations of the service (Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol 2002).

Furthermore, the negativity and positivity biases of interest here are biases in judgment rather than in other processes. Negative behavior attracts more attention, is better encoded, and is more easily recalled (e.g., Folkes 1988; Ybarra and Stephan 1996). The methodologies used in studies 1 and 2 may have minimized those attention and recall effects. Subjects were directed to read material and indicated their responses to it shortly afterward. Consumers may more often make generalizations well after a specific transaction (e.g., when they need to make a repurchase decision, when they are asked for a recommendation). On the other hand, a positivity effect was also found in study 3, which used a more naturalistic methodology.

Study 1 and study 2 reduced the potential effects of service coproduction and customization, an important element distinguishing services (Johnson et al. 1995). In most service interactions, the customer's perceptions of the service provider influence the customer's behavior, which influences the service provider's behavior toward the customer. Those reciprocal effects are noteworthy because an individual will mimic the behavior of another automatically and without awareness of doing so (Chartrand and Bargh 1999). Hostile behavior may elicit hostile behavior. On the other hand, service providers may behave more amiably when they perceive a problem. Future research should determine whether the asymmetric biases observed here are magnified or diminished by service coproduction processes.

The effect of firsthand experience on the positivity effect requires additional research. When the consumer holds beliefs about the firm subgroup or the superordinate group that are more firmly established, different effects may emerge from those observed here. Perceivers who hold strong beliefs about the occupational group's traits may place a deviant service provider into a subgroup (Hamilton and Rose 1980; Weber and Crocker 1983). The subtyping and stereotyping literatures seem to offer rich insights into perceptions of services.

Methodological Issues

Our multimethod approach has advantages, but a disadvantage is that different occupations were examined, making comparisons difficult. Some service subgroups may be more or less coherent, perhaps influencing consumers' inferences. However, since our research found a positivity effect for insurance occupations that seem less coherent than many other services, the positivity effect would seem to be fairly robust. For example, insurance agents are geographically dispersed and act fairly independently, which should decrease perceptions of group coherence.

An additional caution is that marketers may perceive services more broadly than do consumers. Consumers' perceptions provide the basis for the positivity effect. For example, marketers might consider prison guards a service group, but consumers seem more likely to perceive them as part of a governmental function. Hence, it is not surprising that different patterns of inference (inferences from both positive and negative information about the individual) have been found in judgments of prison guards (Hamill et al. 1980). A low expectation of positive behavior from government employees is consistent with lower customer satisfaction with U.S. government services than with other services (Fornell et al. 1996).

Finally, future research needs to establish more precisely the cognitive processes that lead to the positivity effect. If consumers have broad expectations that products have good attributes more than bad (Herr et al. 1991), it seems reasonable that they have similar broad expectations for service providers. However, management theorists have suggested that consumers have specific beliefs about the behaviors service providers exhibit toward customers. "The service encounter is fundamentally a social encounter and . . . customers tend to share fairly clear expectations about what constitutes 'good' service" (p. 90; Ashforth and Humphrey 1993). The dimensions identified by Parasuraman et al. (1985) suggest the kinds of behaviors expected of that role (e.g., responsiveness, credibility). Hence, products and services may also differ on the specificity of consumer expectations.

Further, conceptualizing services as one type of social encounter rather than as a different type of product places a greater emphasis on properties of interpersonal relationships, such as intentionality, emotions, and power. Good service might be expected because consumers make attributions that service employees are subject to the firm's control over their actions, whether directly or through a culture that permeates employees' values. People's attributions about bad service might be restricted to the individual because firms do not intend that employees behave in a negative way toward customers. Hence, consumers' schemas about service providers may go beyond mere valence, with their inferences drawing on their naive theories about firms.

[David Glen Mick served as editor and Michael D. Johnson served as associate editor for this article.]

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