

# **Actions speak louder: Why we use our past behavior to determine our current attitudes**

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Sometimes it's difficult for us to remember how we felt about a product. Was that restaurant pretty good or just okay? Was the movie boring or enjoyable?

A new study reveals that, in many of these cases, consumers will use postpurchase actions – and advertising – as a proxy for lost memories, even if these actions are not a good indication of how we actually felt while using the product. In other words, if we gab about a terrible dinner and a boring movie with loved ones, we might mistake the positive memory of talking about the experience for positive memories of the experience itself.

“People use their feelings of liking or disliking elicited during prior experiences to guide decisions about their future,” explains Elizabeth Cowley (University of Sydney). “When reflecting back on prior events, people assume that their behavior was consistent with the feelings they held at the time.”

For example, Cowley had participants view a short excerpt of a film. She then exposed one group to advertisements for the film containing humorous dialogue, asking them to rate the entertainment value of the advertisement. The other group was exposed to facts about the film and asked to rate the informational value. Participants were then asked to make a choice between the film just sampled and three other film clips. Cowley shows that post-experience exposure to a task requiring emotional judgment interfered with the participants' ability to remember

how well they initially liked the clip, while tasks involving unemotional judgments did not interfere.

“When interference reduces the ability to retrieve experience-based feelings, consumers may unconsciously reflect on what they did to infer how they felt because their post-experience behavior is more accessible,” Cowley writes. “The study showed that people are not particularly adept at retrieving their experience-based affective reaction when they have other non-experience based reactions in memory.”

She continues: “Perhaps the behavioral information may have ‘felt right’ because of an implicit [belief] that behaviors are consistent with attitudes.”

Citation: Elizabeth Cowley, “How Enjoyable Was It” Remembering an Affective Reaction to a Previous Consumption Experience.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: December 2007.

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