

Approach Aversion in Marketing Contexts

Q: Would you be less interested in a product or service just because its spokesperson was moving towards you?

A: Apparently

What is Approach Aversion?

It is a bias against things that move towards us.



Previously this was thought to apply only to approaching threats. Recently, it was shown that the effect is still present, though smaller, for **perfectly innocuous things**, like emoticons or letters. (Hsee et al., JPSP 2014)

OBJECTIVE: Determine whether this unconscious bias is relevant to marketing communications.

IDEA: Look for bias towards approaching things in marketing messages (video advertisements) as measured using marketing metrics.

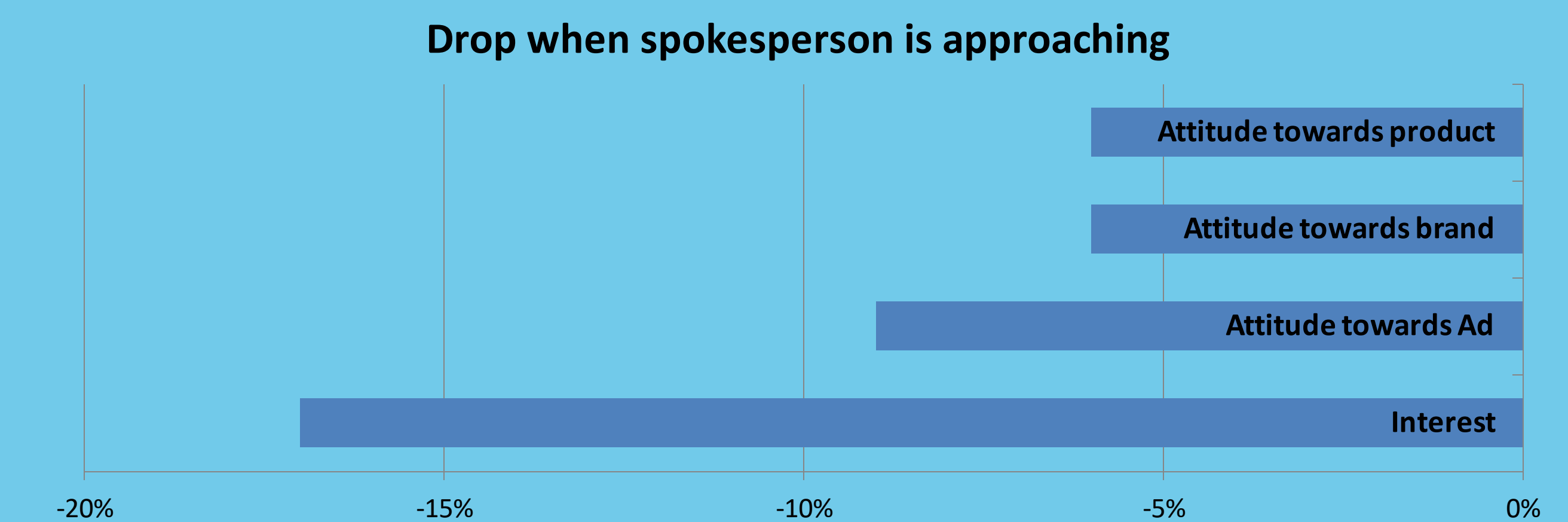
EXPERIMENT: Show people ads which are identical except for static or approaching spokespersons and compare their evaluations of the ad, the product and the brand.



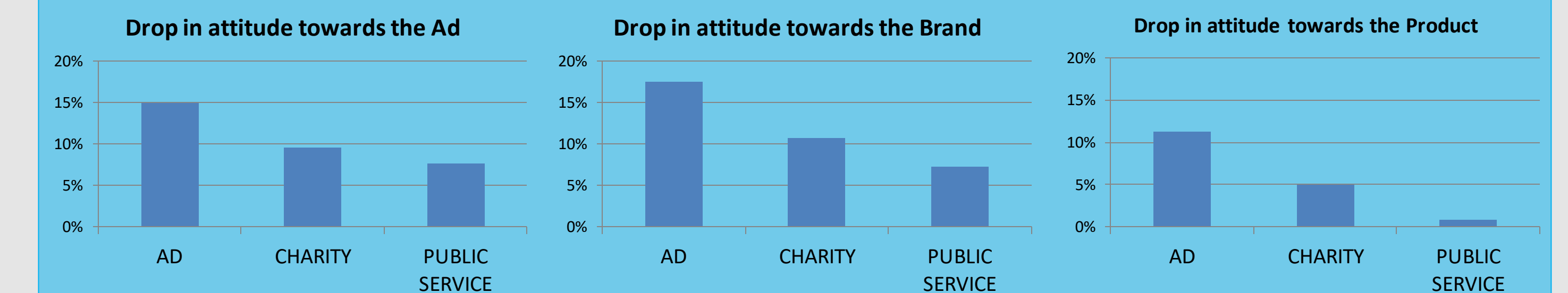
Key Findings to Date

1. Approach Aversion is clearly present in consumers' evaluations of products and services: For all conditions, totaling more than 750 observations, the ad with the approaching spokesperson is viewed less positively. People think the ad less interesting, have less favourable impressions of the brand and express less intent to consume the service. These results are highly statistically significant (p-values generally <0.01).

2. The effect is strongest for evaluations of the ad but persists enough to impact inferences about the brand and product.



3. The type of marketing communication matters a great deal: Messages from self-interested parties suffer from significantly more approach aversion than altruistic messages.



4. The viewer may be less likely to experience the negative bias when they study the ad more actively. Viewers who scored higher on the "Market Maven" scale (which measures interest in new products generally), exhibited marginally less approach aversion. However, this is not true for viewers who score higher on the personality trait "Need for Cognition" (one might expect people higher in NFC to scrutinize ads more closely).

Practical implications of Approach Aversion in marketing communications

For consumers: While it may have made sense to have a negative bias towards anything approaching when we lived in trees and on the savannah, it makes no sense when evaluating messages, brands and products. Awareness of the bias may help to mitigate its effect, and as-yet-undiscovered moderators may allow us to devise simple tricks and rules-of-thumb to counter it (for example by manipulating construal level).

For marketers: Particularly for commercial advertisements, where the effect is greatest, marketers should absolutely avoid designing messages which might suffer from this negative bias.

Unconscious Bias in Marketing Contexts

Products touching



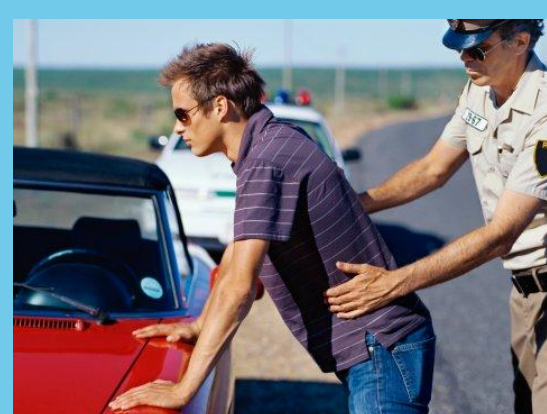
The cookies are less popular when they are in contact with the napkins. (Morales & Fitzsimons, JMR 2007)

Looking up or down



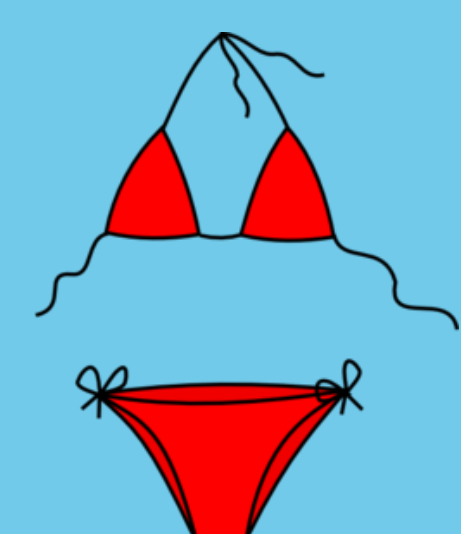
People prefer different products when they look up at them. (Van Kerckhove et al., JCR 2015)

Consumers interacting



All products seem less desirable when an undesirable social interaction precedes evaluation. (Martin, JCR 2012)

Context effects



Bikinis make male consumers impatient. (Van den Bergh et al., JCR 2008)

Current and Planned Research Directions

- Effect of the viewer's personality on the bias:** Do personality traits associated with active consideration of the messages (versus passive/unconscious consideration) decrease the bias? Examples include conscientiousness and need-for-cognition.
- Effect of the viewer's circumstances on the bias:** Do circumstances where a viewer is likely to be vigilant or attentive result in less bias? Examples include the viewer's degree of involvement with the product, the viewer's gender and age, and also the spokesperson's gender and age.
- Consumer control over the effect:** Can awareness of the bias result in its elimination? Can consumers use control of their circumstances to reduce their vulnerability to such biases? Extant research suggests many possible avenues to achieve such control, including controlled breathing, dietary circumstances and looking at natural landscapes.
- Non-visual stimuli:** One of the most unexpected findings regarding Approach Aversion is that it does not only apply to visual perception of something which is approaching through space. Sounds are also susceptible to the bias and the bias exists for things which approach in time as well as in space. Are any of these analogous biases relevant to marketing contexts?

