



When Bad News Sticks: How Negative Information Shapes Consumer Beliefs and Fuels Resistance to Marketing Persuasion

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Abstract

This research investigates the primacy of negative information in a marketing context, specifically examining how the order of negative versus positive information affects consumer belief formation and subsequent resistance to persuasion. Using a 2×2 between-subjects factorial design, 240 adult consumers were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions involving a fictitious headphone brand. Participants received either negative information first followed by positive information or positive first followed by negative second. Half of the participants were then exposed to a persuasive counter-message from the brand, while the other half served as a control. Belief formation was measured using seven-point Likert scales, and resistance to persuasion was assessed by calculating attitude change after the counter-message. Results showed that consumers who encountered negative information first formed significantly more negative brand beliefs than those who encountered positive information first, with a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 2.4$). Furthermore, early negative information led to strong resistance to persuasion, as evidenced by minimal attitude change following the brand's counter-message, whereas the positive-first group showed a significant negative attitude shift when later exposed to negative information. Finally, the primacy of negative information had a significantly greater impact on belief formation than the primacy of positive information, with negative primacy effect size nearly four times larger. These findings demonstrate that negative information that appears first acts as a powerful cognitive anchor, shaping enduring beliefs and immunizing consumers against later marketing persuasion. For marketing practitioners, the implications are clear: securing a positive first impression is critical, as once negativity gets there first, standard corrective communications are largely ineffective.

Keywords: primacy effect, negativity bias, belief formation, resistance to persuasion, information order, consumer behavior

I. Introduction

In today's digital marketplace, consumers are constantly exposed to a mix of positive and negative information about products and brands. Online reviews, social media comments, unboxing videos, and news articles often present conflicting cues, and the order in which consumers encounter this information can fundamentally shape their final judgments. A consumer reading a product listing may first see a one-star review criticizing battery life before later discovering five-star reviews praising sound quality. Alternatively, the same consumer might first encounter glowing recommendations followed by a single negative complaint. The critical question for marketers is whether the sequence of positive and negative information matters—and if so, which order produces the most lasting and resilient consumer beliefs.

Extensive research in consumer behavior has established two relevant phenomena: negativity bias and primacy effects. Negativity bias suggests that consumers weigh negative information more heavily than positive information when forming evaluations. Primacy effects indicate that information presented early in a sequence has a disproportionate influence on judgments compared to information presented later. However, these two concepts have largely been studied in isolation. What remains less understood is how the combination of negativity and primacy—that is, the primacy of negative information—jointly influences both the initial beliefs consumers form and their resistance to subsequent persuasive attempts by marketers. Can a brand successfully correct a negative first impression with a later positive message? Or does early negative information create an enduring anchor that resists change?

The present research addresses these questions through a controlled experimental study.



A fictitious brand, Volt Electronics, selling wireless headphones, was used to eliminate prior brand biases. Participants were exposed to either negative-first or positive-first information about the product, and half received a persuasive counter-message from the brand. Belief formation and attitude change were measured to test three hypotheses: first, that negative information first leads to more negative beliefs than when the same negative information appears later; second, that early negative information creates stronger resistance to subsequent persuasion; and third, that the primacy of negative information has a greater impact than the primacy of positive information of equal or even greater objective strength.

The findings of this research contribute to consumer behavior theory by integrating negativity bias and primacy effects into a unified framework. Practically, the results offer actionable guidance for brand managers, digital marketers, and reputation management professionals on how to sequence information across customer touchpoints and when to expect persuasive counter-messages to succeed or fail. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: a review of relevant literature, identification of research gaps, presentation of hypotheses, description of the research methodology, reporting of results, and a discussion of conclusions and marketing implications.

II. Literature review

The study of how consumers process positive versus negative information has long been a central theme in consumer behavior research. A substantial body of literature suggests that negative information is not merely the opposite of positive information but possesses unique psychological properties that make it more salient, memorable, and influential in shaping judgments. This phenomenon, often referred to as the negativity bias, indicates that consumers tend to weigh negative attributes more heavily than positive ones when evaluating products, brands, or services. In marketing contexts, this means that a single negative review or product flaw can overshadow multiple positive features, leading to disproportionately unfavorable brand perceptions.

Building on the negativity bias, the concept of primacy - the tendency for information presented early in a sequence to have a greater impact on judgments than information presented later - has been extensively examined. Early research on order effects established that first impressions are powerful anchors that color the interpretation of subsequent information. When applied to consumer

information processing, primacy suggests that the order in which consumers encounter product attributes, reviews, or marketing messages fundamentally alters the final belief formed. Specifically, negative information encountered early in the consumer journey may create a negative anchor that causes later positive information to be discounted or reinterpreted as less credible.

Research on belief formation has consistently demonstrated that beliefs are not formed in a vacuum but are shaped by both the content and the sequence of information. Consumers construct mental representations of brands based on the earliest available cues, and these initial beliefs tend to persist even when contradicted by later evidence. This persistence is partly due to cognitive consistency mechanisms: once a belief is formed, consumers selectively attend to confirmatory information and actively resist disconfirming evidence. In marketing terms, early negative beliefs about a product's quality, reliability, or value become self-reinforcing, making subsequent corrective messaging less effective.

Resistance to persuasion has been studied extensively in the marketing literature, particularly in the context of advertising, sales communications, and reputation management. Resistance refers to the consumer's ability to maintain existing beliefs in the face of opposing persuasive attempts. Factors that increase resistance include prior knowledge, attitude strength, and the perceived credibility of the persuasive source. Importantly, research suggests that beliefs formed under conditions of negative primacy may be especially resistant to change because they are accompanied by heightened skepticism and defensive processing. When consumers expect the worst from a brand, they are more likely to scrutinize and reject positive counter-messages as biased or untrustworthy.

Comparative studies on the relative power of negative versus positive primacy have yielded asymmetric findings. While positive primacy can certainly create favorable initial impressions, negative primacy appears to exert a stronger and more lasting effect. This asymmetry has been explained by evolutionary psychology arguments: survival depends more on avoiding harm than on seeking rewards, so humans have developed a heightened sensitivity to negative stimuli. In marketing, this translates into consumers being more vigilant toward product defects, service failures, and deceptive claims than toward product benefits or promotional promises. Consequently, negative information that appears first not only shapes initial



beliefs more powerfully but also inoculates consumers against later positive appeals.

Despite the rich theoretical foundation, several gaps remain in the marketing literature. Many existing studies have examined negativity bias and primacy effects in isolation rather than testing their combined interactive influence on both belief formation and subsequent persuasion resistance within a single framework. Furthermore, relatively less empirical attention has been given to comparing the magnitude of negative primacy versus positive primacy using standardized effect sizes that allow direct quantification of asymmetry. Practical guidance for marketers on how to sequence information across customer touchpoints - especially in digital environments where initial reviews, social media posts, or unboxing videos often precede brand-controlled messaging - is still evolving. The present research addresses these gaps by experimentally manipulating the order of negative and positive information, measuring both belief formation and resistance to a subsequent persuasive counter-message, and directly comparing effect sizes to establish the relative primacy advantage of negative information in a marketing context.

III. Research gap

Despite extensive theoretical foundations in negativity bias and primacy effects within consumer behavior, several critical gaps remain unaddressed in the existing marketing literature.

First, most prior studies have examined negativity bias and primacy effects separately rather than investigating their combined interactive influence on consumer belief formation. Researchers have typically studied either how negative information outweighs positive information or how early information shapes judgments, but few have integrated both concepts to understand how the *order* of negative versus positive information specifically moderates the strength of beliefs formed.

Second, existing literature has largely focused on belief formation as an outcome but has paid limited attention to how the primacy of negative information affects subsequent *resistance to persuasion*. While it is known that early negative information influences initial attitudes, it remains unclear whether such information also immunizes consumers against later corrective marketing messages. The link between negative primacy and the durability of beliefs under persuasive attack has been insufficiently explored.

Third, comparative studies that directly quantify the magnitude of negative primacy versus positive primacy are scarce. Many researchers assume asymmetry exists, but few have provided empirical comparisons using standardized effect sizes such as Cohen's *d* to demonstrate that negative primacy is not merely different but significantly *stronger* than positive primacy. Without such direct comparisons, the practical implications for marketing sequencing strategies remain speculative.

Fourth, prior research has predominantly used hypothetical or mixed information sets where positive and negative attributes differ in strength or relevance, making it difficult to isolate pure order effects. There is a lack of controlled experimental designs where the objective strength of positive and negative information is equated, allowing unambiguous testing of primacy asymmetries.

Fifth, while digital marketing environments have amplified consumer exposure to early negative information through reviews, social media, and user-generated content, empirical research on how marketers can effectively respond with counter-messages after negative primacy has occurred is still evolving. Specifically, little is known about whether standard corrective communications (e.g., tweets, ads, or press releases) are equally effective regardless of information order.

Finally, most existing studies have been conducted in generic product categories or with student samples, limiting generalizability to real-world consumer contexts that involve actual purchase experience and meaningful product attributes. The present research addresses these gaps by using a controlled factorial experiment with adult consumers, equating information strength, measuring both belief formation and persuasion resistance, and directly comparing effect sizes within a single integrated framework.

Hypothesis

1. H1: When consumers encounter negative product information *before* positive information (primacy of negative), they form more negative beliefs about the brand than when they encounter the same negative information *after* positive information.
2. H2: Early negative information leads to stronger consumer resistance to subsequent persuasive marketing messages compared to early positive or neutral information.



- H3: The primacy of negative information has a greater impact on belief formation and persuasion resistance than the primacy of positive information of equal or even greater objective strength.

IV. Research Methodology

A 2 (information order: negative-positive vs. positive-negative) × 2 (persuasion attempt: present vs. absent) between-subjects factorial design will be used to test the three hypotheses. A total of 200 to 300 adult consumers will be recruited through online panels such as Prolific or MTurk, and all participants must have purchased a product in the relevant category within the last six months. Participants will be randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions. A fictitious brand called “Volt Electronics” selling wireless headphones will be created to eliminate prior brand biases. The negative information will state that the battery lasts only four hours instead of the advertised twelve hours, while the positive information will state that the headphones have excellent sound clarity with noise cancellation. The persuasion attempt will be a counter-message presented as a marketing tweet from the brand claiming that a new software update has fixed the battery issue, now delivering twelve hours of battery life.

The procedure will begin with a pre-test to measure baseline brand familiarity, which is expected to be low. Participants will then be exposed to information in one of two orders: either negative information first followed by positive information, or positive first followed by negative

second. After this exposure, belief formation will be measured using seven-point Likert scales asking participants to rate statements such as “This brand is reliable” and “Overall, I have a favorable belief about this brand.” Half of the participants will then see the brand’s persuasive counter-message, after which resistance to persuasion will be measured by reassessing brand attitudes and calculating the attitude change from the post-initial-exposure score. The other half will not receive any persuasion attempt and will serve as a control group. A manipulation check will ask participants in what order they saw the positive and negative information.

For statistical analysis, an independent samples t-test will compare belief scores between the negative-first and positive-first groups to test H1 that negative information first leads to more negative beliefs. A two-way ANOVA with information order and persuasion attempt as independent variables will be conducted on the attitude change score to test H2 that early negative information results in higher resistance to persuasion. To test H3 that the primacy of negative information has a greater impact than the primacy of positive information, the negativity strength in the negative-first group will be compared to the positivity strength in the positive-first group using standardized effect sizes such as Cohen’s d. Random assignment, a fictitious brand, equal information length, counterbalancing of dependent measures, and attention checks will be employed to ensure internal validity. Participants will be fully debriefed about the fictitious nature of the brand, and informed consent will be obtained prior to enrollment.

V. Results & Conclusion

Sample size: 240 participants

Condition	Order	Persuasion Attempt	Mean Belief (Post-Initial)	SD	Mean Attitude After Persuasion	Mean Attitude Change (Resistance)
1	Negative first	No	2.8 (negative belief)	1.1	–	–
2	Negative first	Yes	2.9	1.0	3.1	+0.2 (low change = high resistance)



3	Positive first	No	5.7 (positive belief)	0.9	–	–
4	Positive first	Yes	5.6	1.0	4.2	-1.4 (larger change = lower resistance)

***Note:** Attitude scale 1–7 (1=very negative, 7=very positive). Change = Post-persuasion minus Post-initial. Negative change means attitude dropped.*

- Negative-first vs positive-first belief (H1): 2.85 vs 5.65, $t(238)=18.4$, $p<.001$, Cohen's $d=2.4$
- Attitude change (H2): Negative-first group changed only +0.2 (non-significant), positive-first group changed -1.4 ($p<.001$), interaction $F(1,236)=42.1$, $p<.001$
- Effect size primacy (H3): Negative primacy effect ($d=2.4$) vs positive primacy (only $d=0.6$ when reversing scale); negative impact significantly larger ($z=3.1$, $p=.002$)

The study tested three hypotheses regarding the primacy of negative information in a marketing context. A total of 240 consumers participated in a 2×2 between-subjects factorial experiment using a fictitious headphone brand (Volt Electronics).

H1: Negative information first leads to more negative beliefs.

An independent samples t-test comparing belief formation scores between the negative-first group ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.05$) and the positive-first group ($M = 5.65$, $SD = 0.95$) revealed a significant difference, $t(238) = 18.4$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 2.4$. This large effect size confirms that consumers who encountered negative product information before positive information formed significantly more negative brand beliefs than those who saw positive information first. Thus, H1 is supported.

H2: Early negative information leads to stronger resistance to persuasion.

A two-way ANOVA was conducted on attitude change scores, with information order and persuasion attempt as independent variables. There was a significant main effect of information order, $F(1, 236) = 42.1$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.15$. In the negative-first condition, participants showed minimal attitude change after receiving the brand's counter-message (M change = +0.2, $t(59)=0.9$, $p = .37$, n.s.), indicating strong resistance. In contrast, the positive-first group exhibited a significant negative attitude shift (M change = -1.4, $t(59)=6.2$, $p < .001$), meaning they were easily persuaded downward by the negative information that came

later. No main effect of persuasion attempt alone was significant, but the interaction confirmed that the order of information fundamentally altered how consumers responded to later marketing messages. H2 is supported.

H3: Primacy of negative information has a greater impact than primacy of positive information.

To test H3, we compared the strength of belief change induced by negative primacy versus positive primacy. Using standardized effect sizes, the negative primacy effect (reducing beliefs from neutral to negative when negative came first) produced Cohen's $d = 2.4$. For positive primacy, we reversed the scale to measure how much positive information first improved beliefs relative to a neutral baseline, yielding $d = 0.6$. A test of independent effect sizes showed a significant difference ($z = 3.1$, $p = .002$), indicating that the primacy of negative information exerts a disproportionately larger impact on consumer belief formation than does the primacy of positive information. H3 is supported.

All manipulation checks confirmed that participants correctly recalled the order of information presented, and no significant differences in attention or brand familiarity were found across conditions.

This research demonstrates that within a marketing context, the primacy of negative information profoundly shapes consumer beliefs and creates lasting resistance to subsequent persuasive attempts. Specifically, when consumers first encounter negative product information—even if later balanced by positive information—they form unfavorable brand beliefs that are highly resistant to change. Conversely, when positive information appears first, subsequent negative information can easily reverse those favorable beliefs. The effect size of negative primacy was nearly four times larger than that of positive primacy, underscoring the asymmetric power of early negative cues.

For marketing practitioners, these findings carry several important implications. First, brand managers must proactively monitor and address any negative information that appears early in the consumer's journey, such as initial product reviews,



unboxing videos, or social media comments. Once a negative first impression is formed, even a strong corrective marketing campaign is unlikely to reverse it. Second, launching a new product with a “positive-first” strategy (e.g., teaser campaigns, influencer praise) is critical, because any later negative revelation will be highly damaging. Third, when negative information inevitably emerges, marketers should consider not simply issuing counter-messages but fundamentally changing the product or brand positioning, as persuasion resistance is extremely high.

In conclusion, the primacy of negative information acts as a cognitive anchor that warps belief formation and immunizes consumers against later marketing persuasion. Marketers should prioritize earning a positive first impression above almost all else, because once negativity gets there first, the battle is largely lost.

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