Do negative ratings mean more than positive ratings?
Evidence for hedonic asymmetry in consumer wine and food evaluations

Robin Goldstein (University of California, San Diego)

Over the past few decades, a broad consensus has emerged in the literature of economics and psychology that negative outcomes are more salient and consistently perceived, remembered, and acted upon than positive ones. Prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979, 1981) predicts the asymmetric avoidance of losses more than the seeking of gains of the same amount, while an analogous “positive-negative asymmetry effect” in the psychology literature (e.g. Anderson, 1965; Skowronski et al., 1989; Peeters et al., 1990; Baumeister, Bratslavsky et al., 2001) predicts that negative events are more consistently remembered than positive ones. In the sensory science of flavor perception, Gilbert, Fridlund et al. (1987) and others have found that unpleasant odors are more accurately recognized and better remembered than pleasant odors. However, to date, asymmetric attitudes toward positive and negative outcomes with respect to elicited consumer ratings—whether preferences are stated (e.g. hedonic pleasantness scales, online wine ratings, etc.) or revealed (e.g. amount of actual consumption, or dollars spent on a good)—have scarcely been discussed in the literature. I propose a new model that accounts for the frequently observed “J-shaped” distribution of wine and other consumer ratings (first proposed by Hu et al., 2007), using a heuristic that is sensitive both to the number of notches on a rating or ranking scale and to the type of rating or ranking elicited. I then test this model against a variety of data sets from online consumer-generated food and wine ratings, and I find that consumers are far more consistent with respect to negative ratings than positive ratings, suggesting that a wide range of crowd-sourced consumer ratings data should be reinterpreted to account for these asymmetries. Finally, I derive implications for hedonic rating scales for food, wine, and other consumer products.