

Mere Exposure Effect

The mere exposure effect is a psychological phenomenon by which people tend to develop a preference for things or people that are more familiar to them than others. Repeated exposure increases familiarity. This effect is therefore also known as the familiarity effect.

The earliest known research on the effect was conducted by Gustav Fechner in 1876. The effect was also documented by Edward Titchener and described as the glow of warmth one feels in the presence of something familiar.

However, several other scientists, such as Robert Zajonc continued to explore this effect. Zajonc theorized that the more often individuals came into contact with a given stimulus, the more likely they would be to recognize the object and must form their own attitude about the stimulus by thinking about it. This is a broader theory than the common mere exposure effect theory, which states that the attitude change brought about by more frequent exposure to the stimulus is a positive one.

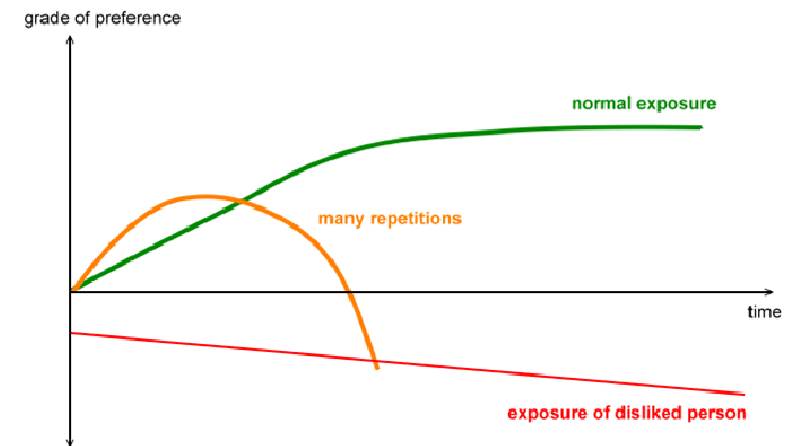
In his studies, Zajonc demonstrated that subjects rated stimuli which had been presented to them more positively than similar ones that had not been presented. He recognized that the frequency-value correlation does not constitute sufficient evidence for the causal relation between "mere exposure" and attitude enhancement. He therefore set out to demonstrate the causal relation by carrying out three experiments in which various stimuli (nonsense, paralog Chinese-type nonsense characters, and photographs of faces) were presented in counterbalanced order to subjects a different number of times (usually varying between 0 and 25), and then rated on a scale of liking or favorableness (usually the "good-bad" scale of the semantic differential). The results showing changes in affect as a consequence of "mere exposure" are entirely convincing. The more often people saw these signs, the more people liked them although it might have been that they don't even understand the signs (Chinese characters). According to Zajonc, the exposure effect is capable of taking place without conscious cognition, and that "preferences need no inferences.

Additional experiments showed that the effect is very robust and reliable and reaches its maximum effect within 10 and 20 presentations. However, using too many repetitions can reduce this preference.

In practice, one can conclude that for interpersonal attraction, this means, the more often a person is seen by someone, the more pleasing and likeable that person appears to be.

Besides, an additional psychological experiment demonstrated that the exposure to pictures of people the subjects did not like made them dislike them even more.

The following graph and its three curves will now indicate the mentioned findings.



Obviously, the mere exposure effect is quite important for marketing strategies when it comes to advertisement. The effect seems to be very helpful when a company or a product is new and unfamiliar. However, other researchers found out that companies' reputation often suffers if they are exposed in the media too often.

In an experiment by Murphy and Zajonc in 1993, they found out that stimuli which are received below the threshold level of awareness are not sufficiently strong to alter consumer's purchase decisions. Subconsciously, people can develop only attitudes towards a product category rather than towards a certain brand. Due to this result, the mere exposure is not capable of creating brand loyalty which is very important for companies' advertising strategies.

Further there is a newer explanation for the mere exposure effect which states that prior exposure increases processing fluency at the time consumers have to make a judgment; therefore misattribution of positive feelings (due to fluency) to the ad or brand comes into effect. This means that with mere exposure the more often you see an information the better you can process it and the more fluent it is. Human beings like easy processing rather than difficult cognitive processes so they stick with familiar things. This may be the explanation for their positive feelings towards an ad or brand.

References:

Izard, C., Kagan, J., & Zajonc, R. (Eds.). (1984). [Emotions, cognition, and behavior](#). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Zajonc, R. B. (2003). The selected works of R. B. Zajonc. New York: Wiley.

Zajonc, R.B. (1968) Attitudinal effects of mere exposure, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 9: 1-27.