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A Functional Assessment of the Impact of Advantages and Disadvantages of Breastfeeding on Attitude Development

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Abstract

Although health and other benefits of breastfeeding for mother and child have been repeatedly shown, there is still a large proportion of women who do not initiate or continue breastfeeding. The aim of the current study is to analyze the contribution of the presentation of advantages and disadvantages of breastfeeding in developing an attitude towards breastfeeding among Dutch and Flemish women in the reproductive age.

In two experiments factorial combinations of advantages and disadvantages were presented to a group of women between 18 and 45 years. The first group consisted mainly of women without prior experience with breastfeeding; most women who participated in the second experiment had breastfed one or more of their children. The second experiment differed from the first one in that the exact formulation of disadvantages was manipulated between subjects: disadvantages of breastfeeding were presented as advantages of formula feeding. In both experiments, women reported their attitude towards breastfeeding after each presentation of a combination of arguments.

In both experiments information on health related advantages produces the most positive attitude towards breastfeeding. Practical disadvantages were found to be the least important determinants of attitude. Combining advantages of breastfeeding with advantages of formulafeeding generated a more favourable attitude towards breastfeeding than combining advantages of breastfeeding with disadvantages of breastfeeding. Moreover, variations in the presentation of disadvantages seem to have larger impact than variations in the presentation of advantages. Although an averaging type integration rule was expected, the results suggest that some women do not take all information from the presented advantages and disadvantages into account to form an overall attitude towards breastfeeding. Responses of women who plan to have children show the expected subtracting integrating rule. The current results imply that campaigns to promote breastfeeding should take into account differences between target populations and use a positively formulated message.

Method

Experiment 1

Participants & procedure

Participants (N=98 women) were recruited from a student population. Mean age was 29.02 years (SD = 7.08). The experiment consisted of judging a set of statements which were composed of pros and cons of breastfeeding. Pros were: "Breastfeeding is cheaper than formula feeding", "Breastfeeding helps you to recuperate more rapidly after pregnancy and has health advantages for the mother" and "Breastfeeding is healthier than formula feeding; it contains all necessary nutrients for a baby and protects against several infections and diseases". Cons were: "When breastfeeding you need to watch out what you eat and be careful with dieting" and "When breastfeeding it is impossible to know whether your baby had sufficient milk". Additionally, one set of statements contained only advantages. Statements were rated on a 250-point VAS with end anchors being "very positive" and "very negative".

Experiment 2

Participants & procedure

Participants (N=318) were recruited from a student population from a distance university. The mean age of the participating women was 31.66 years (SD = 4.64). As in experiment 1, participants rated a set of statements composed of pros and cons of breastfeeding. A between subjects manipulation was performed of the formulation of the cons of breastfeeding, implying that one group received statements composed of advantages of formula feeding instead of disadvantages of breastfeeding.

Results

Based on single subjects ANOVA, three different patterns could be discerned of which one resembles the subtracting type integration rule. An additional analysis on data showing the third pattern confirmed an averaging type integration rule. One pattern showed relatively small main effects for both factors in the overall ANOVA while single subjects analyses revealed no significant effects (with $p > .10$). Overall attitude was mainly determined by women's attitude prior to the experiment. The second pattern is characterized by a relatively large main effect for advantages, indicating that women only take into account advantages when forming an attitude.

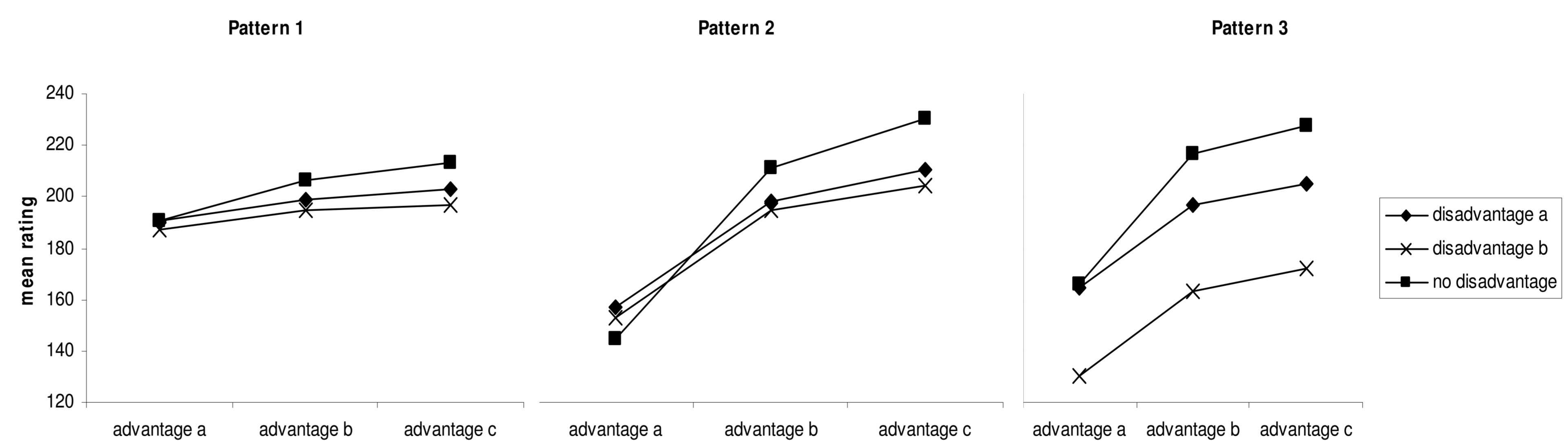


Figure 1. Results of the FM experiment split across three patterns. Pattern three showed the expected main effects for both advantages and disadvantages while in Pattern one and two no integration rule could be established.

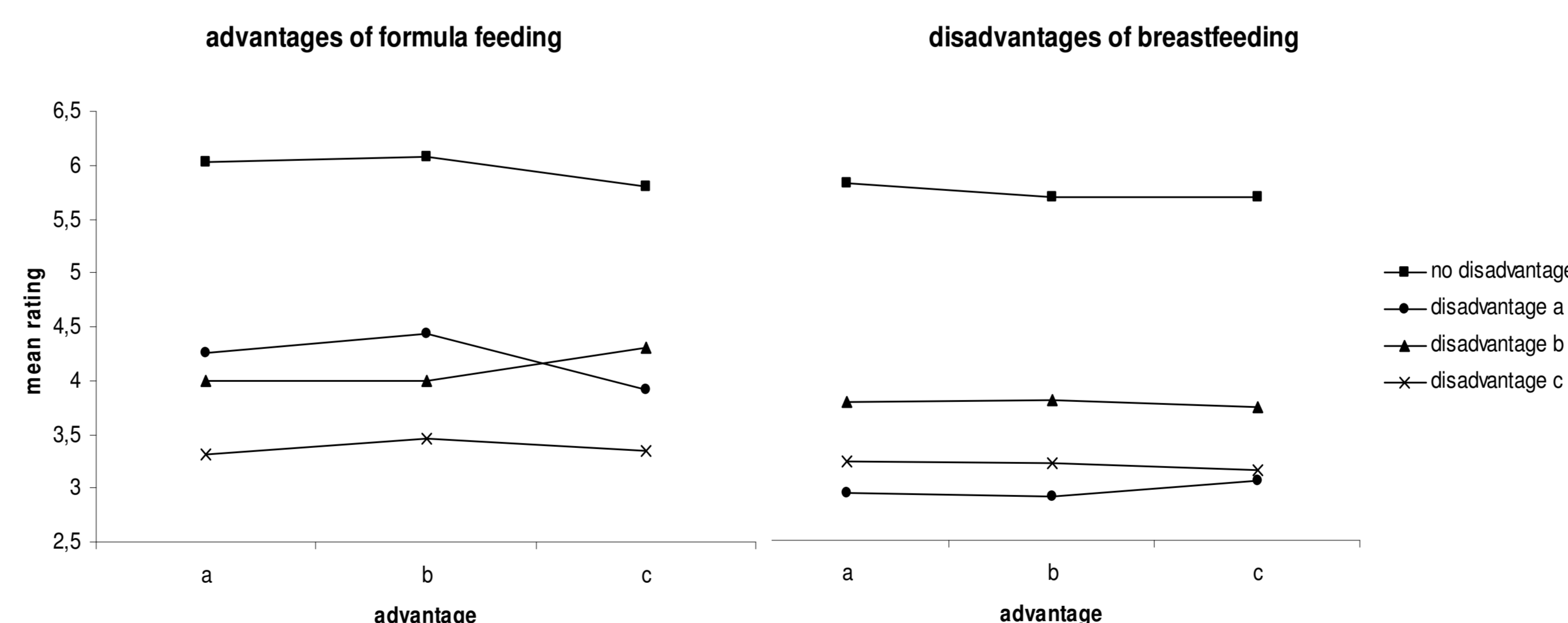


Figure 2. Results of the FM experiment in two conditions. The left panel shows the mean attitude based on pros and cons of breastfeeding while the right panel shows pros of breastfeeding in combination with pros of formulafeeding.

Results from the second experiment showed that positively formulated messages (i.e. advantages of formula feeding) generated the most positive attitude towards breastfeeding. Moreover the order of the importance of the stimuli seemed to differ across the experimental conditions.

Conclusions

Our first study showed that three clearly discernable integration strategies were present in our sample. Women showing one of those three patterns differed in way their prior attitude influenced the formation of an attitude towards breastfeeding based on the statements. Women for whom the presented information was more relevant (i.e. who were pregnant or planning to become pregnant) took into account most of the information and showed the expected averaging integration pattern. In study 2 it was found that, even when message content is constant, the valence of the message seems to impact on the attitude as well. In breastfeeding promotion programs, pros of formula feeding should thus be preferred over cons of breastfeeding.