Product Attribute Evaluations: Role of Consumer Experience and Halo Effects

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Product Attribute Evaluations: Understanding the Role of Consumer Experience and Halo Effects Sylvia Long-Tolbert Drexel University Brian D. Till Saint Louis University Srinivasan Swaminathan Drexel University ABSTRACT

Traditional multi attribute models treat consumers’ evaluation of different attributes without considering the interrelationship among the evaluation of these attributes. We conducted two experiments, where consumers evaluated search, experience and credence attributes both before and after trying products. Based on the theories of ‘halo effects’ and ‘information diagnosticity’, we find that these attribute evaluations are not independent of one another. Specifically, consumers’ post-trial evaluation of credence attributes are found to be affected by their post-trial evaluation of experience attributes. However, such halo effects are not present for search attributes.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Product trial is an important marketing activity in highly competitive markets where true product differentiation is lacking (Bloom and Pailin 1995). As a personal introduction to a brand, product trials are frequently used to gain consumer acceptance of innovative offerings (Smith and Swinyard 1982). The self-generated knowledge produced from product trials serves as an important input to consumer brand knowledge—the experiential information subsequently becomes the basis for product-related brand associations. According to Keller (1993) brand associations are the foundation of a brand’s image and the primary mechanism for imparting brand meaning to consumers. However, most brands are an amalgamation of attributes that vary in kind and whose relative importance in brand building is unclear.

We explore the influence of experience and non-experience based attributes on brand evaluations by drawing on previous findings from consumer behavior research. The extant literature reveals that direct experience compared to indirect experience disproportionately affects consumer beliefs (Fazio and Zanna 1978, Smith and Swinyard 1988). Additionally, brand beliefs derived from direct experience are stronger and held with greater confidence than those constructed from marketer-controlled sources of information such as advertising (Fazio and Zanna 1978). Moreover, the influence of direct experience on consumer brand beliefs tends to vary depending on an attribute’s specific properties (Wright and Lynch 1995). Based on the seeming power of self-generated knowledge and direct experience, the major premise guiding this research is that consumers anchor their beliefs on experience rather than non-experience attributes when trying products.

Research on halo effects, a cognitive process in which the global evaluation of a brand influences one’s response to other attributes or the impression of one attribute shapes the impression of another independent attribute (Nisbett and Wilson 1977), permits us to make a priori predictions about the influence of experience-based attributes on brand evaluations. For example, co-variation in attribute relationships appears to be driven by experience attributes, Wirtz and Bateson (1995) also proclaim that experience attributes have a potential to induce ‘halo effects’. Beckwith and Lehmann (1975) and James and Carter (1978) further suggest that attributes lacking a physical dimension or well-defined properties tend to be affected by halo effect. Hence, it is possible that the nexus of brand evaluations resides in consumers’ evaluation of experience attributes.

The purpose of this research is to identify the source of co-variation, if any, in product trials. Our investigation of consumers’ evaluation of the different types of attributes (i.e., search, experience and credence) builds on theories of ‘halo effects’ and ‘information diagnosticity. We make two predictions: (1) attribute evaluations for search, experience and credence attributes are dependent on one another and (2) consumers’ post-trial evaluation of credence attributes are affected by their post-trial evaluation of experience attributes.

We conducted two experiments using everyday grocery items (fruit cocktail and trash bags) to test our hypotheses with student subjects. In Study 1, subjects evaluated search, experience and credence attributes for a nationally-branded product both before and after trying the product. The primary measures included attribute evaluations for each of the three types of attributes both before and after trying the product. We analyzed the data to understand how post-trial ratings of search, experience and credence attributes vary when compared to the pre-trial ratings. Study 2 replicated the first study using a different national brand as the target product. The key findings from both studies support our hypotheses. First, we found evaluations of search, experience and credence attributes are not independent. Subjects displayed a systematic pattern of bias in their post-trial attribute evaluations. Second, subjects’ post-trial evaluation of experience attributes compared to their pre-trial evaluation significantly affected their post-trial credence attribute evaluation. The observed halo effect applied to both positive and negative brand evaluations. However, evaluations of search attributes were not affected by the halo effect.

In sum, product trial experiences appear to alter consumer evaluations of credence attributes but they show no significant influence on evaluations of search attributes. The halo effects we observed in attribute-level evaluations stem from the anchoring of brand evaluations around experience attributes. Consequently, the presence of halo effects in brand evaluations can potentially enhance or erode brand building efforts for nationally-branded products by overshadowing the true merits or masking the inadequacies in search and credence attributes. Marketing academicians and managers should increase their efforts to understand and harness the power of experience attributes to create unique brand associations.

REFERENCES