The Process By Which Brand Committed Consumers Evaluate Competitive Brands: the Case For Similarity and Dissimilarity Testing

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We examine the evaluation of competitive brands by high and low commitment consumers. We propose that both high and low commitment consumers use a selective hypothesis testing mechanism. However, we predict that high commitment consumers use a dissimilarity testing process, while low commitment consumers use a similarity testing process, resulting in different outcomes for the evaluation of competitor brands. Three studies are reported that examine these predictions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Most research on brand commitment has focused on how people defend their attitudes when faced with information that undermines their attitudinal position. However, the effects of attitudinal commitment may not be limited to mounting defenses only when an individual’s attitude is challenged. As Chaiken, Liberman and Eagly (1989) observe, individuals not only resist information that is counter to their preferred positions, but may also actively undermine information that “supports non-preferred positions.” The process by which committed consumers evaluate competitive brands even when those brands do not attack one’s preferred brand is studied in this research. Specifically, the cognitive processes that are involved in generating the bias is examined.

When asked to make a judgment about an object, it is not made in isolation, but is made with reference to some other object or a standard. We first argue that high commitment consumers will choose the brand that they are committed to as the comparison standard while low commitment consumers are more likely to select an exemplar, or a prototype as the standard (See Raghunathan and Irwin 2001).

Next, since low commitment consumers are not ‘attached’ to any one brand they are likely to be more ‘inclusive’ in their focus while high commitment consumers are ‘exclusive’ in their intent since their focus is on preserving the existing brand attachment and have a reason to limit their consideration set. This inclusive versus exclusive focus of low versus high commitment consumers should translate to how they evaluate an advertised brand. Low commitment consumers, because of their interest in including other brands, will tend to look at the similarities between the advertised brand and their current set of preferred brands. On the other hand, high commitment consumers, because of their interest in excluding other brands, will focus on the differences between the advertised brand and their preferred brand. These differences in the type of processing that an advertised brand is subjected to will translate into differences in attitudes toward the brand for high versus low commitment consumers. The focus on similarities will make low commitment consumers assimilate the advertised brand toward their preferred brand (assuming the advertisement message is strong and persuasive). The focus on differences will make the high commitment consumers contrast the advertised brand away from their preferred brand (e.g., Mussweiler 2003). Three studies are reported that examine these predictions.

In the first study, the objective was to show that consumers who are more versus less committed to a brand will rate a new competitive brand differently due to differences in the level of similarity or dissimilarity they focus on. As expected, when provided an advertisement for a new brand, high commitment participants seemed to generate more dissimilar thoughts while low commitment consumers seemed to generate more similarity thoughts.

In the second study, a more specific test for similarity/dissimilarity testing was adopted. It was argued that if both high and low commitment consumers are instructed to focus on the similarities between their preferred brand and the advertised brand, the effect of the instructions on low commitment consumers should be marginal because they already focus on the similarities, but the effect of the instructions on high commitment consumers should be greater because it changes the nature of their processing and makes them focus more on the similarities between the two brands. The focus on similarities should lead the high commitment consumers to report greater similarity between the advertised and their preferred brand than they would do in the absence of such instructions. Thus, compared to a control condition, high commitment consumers who are instructed to focus on the similarities between an advertised brand and their preferred brand would report greater similarity between the two brands and more positive attitudes toward the advertised brand, whereas there would be minimal effect of such instructions on low commitment consumers. The results of this study confirmed these expectations.

Finally, the third study was conducted to test the proposition that high commitment individuals invoke their preferred brand as the standard while low commitment individuals invoke either an exemplar or prototype as the standard for comparison. Using a priming manipulation and argumentation similar to that we employed in study 2 we find that high commitment individuals have a more positive evaluation of the advertised brand when asked to focus on the differences between an advertised brand and a less preferred brand (rather than their most preferred, and therefore committed brand) However, since low commitment individuals are more inclusive and use an exemplar or prototype brand for comparison purposes, having them focus on the differences between a less preferred brand and the advertised brand had a less effect on their brand evaluations.

These set of studies suggest that committed consumers are more likely to invoke their preferred brand and focus on how the advertised brand is different from it. This process, we find, results in committed individuals contrasting the advertised brand away from their preferred brand, and thus lower their evaluations. On the other hand, we find that less committed individuals’ focus is on the similarities between the advertised brand and the brand they invoke. Due to the focus on similarities, less committed individuals are more likely to assimilate the advertised brand towards the brand that comes to their mind, and thus generate more positive evaluations.

While Ahluwalia (2000) found that high commitment consumers employ various biased processing mechanisms to counter information that attacks their attitudes, it appears that the biased processing mechanisms that are employed by high commitment consumers are different when faced with information about competitive brands. When faced with an advertisement for a competitive brand, high commitment consumers instinctively appear to adopt a ‘rejection’ mode of processing where they are seeking out ways to undermine the brand. This is accomplished primarily by contrasting the advertised brand away from one’s preferred brand by focusing on how the new brand is different from their preferred brand.

REFERENCES


