The Effects of Different Category Context on Target Brand Evaluations

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Three studies support the conclusion that a contextual prime can influence evaluations of a target from a different category, and that the effect is moderated by the decision maker’s expertise in the target category, and the accessibility of the contextual prime. In a base condition, experts exhibit an assimilation effect and novices a comparison contrast. Increasing the accessibility of the prime prompts a correction contrast effect among experts and an assimilation effect among novices. A reduction in the resources available for processing the highly accessible prime results in experts engaging in assimilation and in novices exhibiting a comparison contrast. These findings are explained in terms of an interpretation and a comparison process.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Contrary to previous studies of contextual priming effects, which focus on the effects of priming same category exemplars or traits, the current study examines how the evaluation of a target brand is affected when the context is a brand from a category other than the one in which the target holds membership.

Only a few studies have investigated the effects of priming other category products on target evaluation. The predominant finding is an assimilation effect (e.g. Stapel et al. 1998; Raghunathan and Irwin 2001). However, Meyers-Levy and Sternthal (1993) found a contrast effect when resource allocation was substantial. These observations raise the question of when a contextual prime from a different category will prompt assimilation and when it will stimulate contrast.

In understanding how other category products affect the evaluation of a target product, we posit that consumers evaluate a target product in a two-stage process: interpretation and judgment. At the interpretation stage, consumers first attempt to form a cognitive representation of ambiguous target information. If the information associated with another category product is accessible at this time, consumers are more likely to interpret the ambiguous target information as consistent with the context. This process will result in an assimilation effect. Assimilation is not the only possible effect of context that might occur during encoding. Making the context highly accessible may prompt consumers to recognize that the context influenced their representation of the target, and thus prompt them to correct for this bias. The process of correcting for the effect of context may result in a contrast effect if individuals overcorrect for the bias.

The judgment process is defined as locating the value of a stimulus along a specified dimension. To locate the value of the target interpreted at interpretation stage, it has to be compared to some referent or standard. If context information is used as a comparison standard at the judgment stage, the evaluation of the target is likely to be contrasted away from the context because the target and context are members of different categories.

Three experiments provide empirical support for the hypothesis. Experiment 1 investigates the moderating role of expertise on the impact of a contextual prime from a different category on target evaluations. We anticipated that experts would use a contextual prime when interpreting the target stimulus and exhibit an assimilation effect. Novices were expected use a contextual prime as a contrast effect whereas experts exhibited an assimilation effect when a different category context was primed.

In Experiments 2, the effects of increasing the accessibilities of the benefits associated with the prime on target evaluations were investigated. The notion is that increasing the accessibilities of the benefits will have different effects on novices and experts. We expected novices to include the benefits activated by the context prime when the benefits are highly accessible. On the other hand, experts were expected to correct their initial judgments because highly accessible benefits are likely to alert them of a biasing influence of the prime. The accessibility of benefits associated with the prime was manipulated by asking participants to write an appropriate word that best described the brand that was presented in the context. The results in the low accessibility condition replicated our previous findings. Consistent with our previous findings, experts exhibited assimilation and novices exhibited contrast. Different outcomes emerged when the benefits implied by prime were made accessible. Here, novices exhibited assimilation. They responded in the same manner as experts did in the control condition. On the other hand, increased accessibility of information related to the prime alerted experts to correct their initial judgments. In the process they overcorrected and thus exhibited a correction contrast.

Experiment 3 shows that even when the contextual prime is made highly accessible, reducing the resources available for the processing task results in a comparison contrast for novices and an assimilation effect for experts. To examine this possibility, respondents were asked to engage in a secondary task while evaluating the target product.

These findings have important implications for contextual priming literature. They suggest that contexts from other categories can affect a target evaluation and that the specific context effect found is influenced by the respondent’s knowledge of the target category and the accessibility of the contextual prime. The data also provide a means of distinguishing comparison and correction contrast by manipulating availability of cognitive resources. In so doing, the research questions whether factors such as the type of contextual prime (exemplar vs. trait) and the extremity of the prime are uniquely related to specific contrast effects, as has been suggested in the literature (Moskowitz and Skurnik 1999).

REFERENCES