Consumers encounter a variety of novel combinations in the marketplace, including hybrid products (e.g., PDA phones; camera pens; GPS radios) and brand alliances (e.g., Hewlett Packard and Starbucks). In most cases, consumers are familiar with each element of the combination but have not considered the meaning of their union. As shown in recent work in psychology, the way in which consumers construct a representation for the new product or fused brand will influence their preferences for it. In this research, we use the conceptual combination literature in psychology to develop and test hypotheses in two studies. Specifically, we examine the factors influencing consumers’ interpretations of novel noun-noun combinations. Our results suggest that the similarity of the two nouns, the category level of each word (basic vs. superordinate), and the order of the two words all have significant influences on how consumers generate meaning for the novel combinations.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

How do consumers make sense of new products? Consumer research has largely focused on new product interpretations based on a single categorization cue (e.g. New product is a PDA) or a single analogical cue (e.g. New product is like a PDA). However, with the abundance of new products in the marketplace that defy straightforward categorization (e.g. hybrid products), single cue based interpretation is often insufficient. Recent research in psychology posits that the “ability to combine concepts in novel ways allows us to think new thoughts and imagine new possibilities” (Costello and Keane 2001). The purpose of this session is to present ongoing research that examines how consumers combine or compare multiple concepts or categories to construct interpretations of new products.

Together, the papers provide a broad perspective on how consumers combine and align multiple concepts to derive property or relation based meanings for novel products. Further, the papers provide insights into the factors that influence the interpretations, the processes underlying the interpretations, as well as the outcomes resulting from the interpretations. The papers shed light on several new product scenarios in the marketplace ranging from instances where the new product is a combination of multiple concepts (e.g. PDA phones) to instances where the new product is compared to analogous concepts (e.g. New product is like a Jacuzzi and a Therapist).

The first paper by Moreau, Dale and Kirmani, analyzes data from two experiments to demonstrate that the similarity of concepts, the category level of the concepts (basic vs. superordinate), and the order in which the concepts are presented influence the nature of interpretations (property vs. relational) and preferences for the new product. The second paper by Rajagopal and Burnkrant, analyzes data from two experiments to illustrate that the nature of interpretation strategy primed (property vs. relational), leads to differences in the new product inferences (multiple category vs. single category). Finally, the paper by Gupta and Sen, analyzes data from three experiments to investigate how and why the distance between analogous concepts (far vs. near) used to describe the new product, influences the interpretations and preferences for it.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“From Combination Products to Brand Alliances: How Conceptual Combination Influences Consumers’ Preferences”

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Consumers encounter a variety of novel combinations in the marketplace, including hybrid products (e.g., PDA phones; camera pens; GPS radios) and brand alliances (e.g., Hewlett Packard and Starbucks). In most cases, consumers are familiar with each element of the combination but have not considered the meaning of their union. As shown in recent work in psychology, the way in which consumers construct a representation for the new product or fused brand will influence their preferences for it.

Under the heading of conceptual combination, psychologists have examined the cognitive processes that people engage in when trying to make sense of novel word combinations. Costello and Keane (2000) identified five classes of interpretations: relational (a relation is asserted between the two objects), property (a property of one object is asserted onto the other), hybrid (a blend of both objects), conjunctive (a combination of both concepts), or known-concept (focuses on a known-concept related to the two objects). The majority of interpretations fall in the relational or property categories, with hybrid, conjunctive and known-concept interpretations occurring only rarely. However, little research has examined the conditions under which these different interpretations occur. We hypothesize that similarity of the words, the category level of each noun (e.g., basic vs. superordinate), and the order in which the nouns are presented should influence how consumers interpret novel combinations.

Specifically, we predict that more abstract superordinate categories will enhance the likelihood of a relational interpretation while basic level categories will focus consumers more on concrete features, thereby increasing the likelihood of property interpretations. This effect should be more pronounced when the two nouns are more similar, because similarity should facilitate alignment in the comparison.

In perfect hybrids, word order should not matter (e.g., a drill screwdriver should have the same interpretation and preference as a screwdriver drill). In the marketplace, however, we expect that perfect hybrids are rare and that word order does matter. From conceptual combination theory, the header (i.e., the second word) has been shown to carry the categorization information with the modifier (i.e., the first word) providing more specific, descriptive information (Costello and Keane 2000). Even in the case of the drill/screwdriver combination or the HP/Starbucks alliance, we hypothesize that simply changing word order may change preferences via categorization processes because the word position (header vs. modifier) is likely to remain a powerful interpretation cue.

Study 1 assessed the impact of category level and noun similarity on consumers’ interpretations of conceptual combinations. The study was a mixed design with three factors manipulated between subjects: 2 (modifier category level: superordinate or basic) X 2 (header category level: superordinate or basic) X 2 (similarity: similar or dissimilar). 115 participants were presented with four novel noun-noun combinations and asked to provide two definitions for each combination. The category level of both the modifier and header were manipulated independently, with either being superordinate or basic. In addition, the relationship between the two nouns was either similar or dissimilar.

Two judges classified each definition into one of the five types. Judges also assessed the primary source of knowledge and assessed the type of information transferred from both the modifier and header to the new concept. Preliminary results indicate that the category level of the header, and the interaction between the category level of the modifier and the header significantly influenced the likelihood of relational and property interpretations. A superordinate header increased the likelihood of a relational interpretation (F=19.33, p<.0001), and this effect was enhanced when
the modifier was also superordinate (F=6.87, p<.01). Further, when the nouns were similar, relational interpretations were less frequent (F=56.5, p>.0001). When relational interpretations declined, property interpretations increased. Overall, the incidence of pure hybrid interpretations was low. Taken together, this study provides crucial understanding of the conditions under which different types of interpretations occur. However, the nouns participants saw were different across conditions. In the next study, we hold the nouns constant across all conditions but vary the order in which they are observed. This manipulation allows for a more controlled test of the influence of position (header vs. modifier) on interpretation.

Study 2 manipulated a single factor between-subjects (word order). Participants provided their own definitions of and preferences for each novel combination as well as plausibility ratings for a fixed set of possible definitions. Half the subjects saw one set of conceptual combinations (e.g., vitamin-coffee, laptop-projector, computer-purse, purse-sock, and chair-basket), while the other half saw the same set with the words reversed. The results show that word order significantly influences a) participants’ interpretations of the conceptual combination, and more importantly for marketers, b) preferences for the combined concept.

“Conceptual Combination and Inferences about Ambiguous Products”
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A robust finding in the categorization literature has been the finding that inferences about an object are limited to a single category (Malt, Ross and Murphy 1995; Murphy and Ross 1996; Ross and Murphy 1994). For example, if an object is categorized as a cell phone, then inferences about the object will be limited to those appropriate for a cell phone and will not include any inferences from other categories. This finding suggests that people do not seem to hold multiple category inferences about single objects, i.e. they do not believe that an object can possess attributes of more than one category. However, many products that exist in today’s marketplace are ambiguous with respect to the product category to which they belong and possess attributes of multiple categories. For example, products like the Handspring Treo possess features and functionalities of a cell phone and a PDA while crossover vehicles like the Nissan Murano and Chrylser Pacifica possess features of a minivan and a SUV. Success for such products depends on being able to convince consumers that they possess features of more than one category. Hence the finding with respect to single category inferences need to be re-examined to suggest how multiple category inferences can be induced. The current paper therefore aims at understanding how single category inferences can be extended to multiple categories so that a single object can be perceived to possess features of more than one category.

We refer to the literature on conceptual combinations to overcome the problem of single category inferences. The literature on conceptual combinations focuses on how people interpret novel noun-noun combinations such as “whale boat”. Past research in this area has found that people predominantly interpret novel combinations in one of two ways—property interpretations and relational interpretations (Costello and Keane 2001). Under property interpretations, attributes from both nouns are transferred to the combination. For example, a whale boat could be a boat that is used to watch whales. Property interpretations therefore lead to the presence of attributes from more than one category in a single object. Hence, we suggest that priming respondents with property interpretations (versus relational interpretations) will enable them to make multiple category inferences.

We further explore why property interpretations induce multiple category inferences and suggest that greater attention is paid to both categories under property interpretations which allows for easy retrieval of both sets of category attributes during product judgments. Under relational interpretations, greater attention will be paid to the head category’s attributes, leading to faster retrieval of only one category’s attributes during product judgments.

Two empirical studies were conducted to test our research propositions. In Study 1, we primed respondents with different interpretation strategies (property vs. relational) and exposed them to information about an ambiguous product that was labeled as either a PDA or a Camera. As expected, we find that when primed with a property interpretation strategy, respondents are able to make multiple category inferences and believe that the product will possess attributes of both a PDA and a Camera. When primed with a relational interpretation strategy however, respondents make single category inferences and believe that the product will either possess features of a PDA or a Camera but not both. Hence, property interpretations appear capable of inducing multiple category inferences.

In Study 2, we examine why property interpretations induce multiple inferences by incorporating a response time variable to measure accessibility to information about the two categories. As predicted, we find that under property interpretations, respondents exhibit no differences in speed of retrieval of information about both categories while under relational interpretations, respondents are significantly faster at retrieving information about one category as compared to the second category.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research contributes to the literatures on categorization and conceptual combinations. We combine research from two different literature streams—traditional categorization theories and psycholinguistics—to examine how inferences about one category can be influenced by inferences from other categories. The finding that all product inferences are not derived solely through categorization, but also from the type of interpretation strategy used is a radical departure from traditional categorization theory findings, which predict that inferences are derived from a single category. From a managerial perspective, this research provides a better understanding of the comprehension processes of ambiguous products by consumers and suggests ways by which marketers can promote acceptance of their products.

“Learning and Liking through Comparison: The Influence of Multiple Analogies on New Product Interpretations and Preferences”
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Previous research in marketing and psychology (e.g., Gentner, Ratterman, and Forbus 1993; Roehm and Sternthal 2002) has asserted that analogy cues with their emphasis on structural relations communicate the core functionality of a new product effectively. However, researchers have highlighted the shortcoming of a single analogy cue by showing that in the absence of surface similarity between the new product and an analogy cue, consumers may not be able to detect the common relation between the new product and analogy cue. This shortcoming can be eliminated and the unique benefits of analogies can be realized if consumers can compare the new product to multiple analogous concepts in a synergistic manner so that the underlying benefit is illuminated. Marketers of new products, which defy straightforward categoriza-