Reconstructing Memory For Evaluations: the Role of Past Feelings, Past Behaviour, and Post-Experience Information
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How do consumers remember how much they enjoyed an experience? In marketing, evaluations have been considered a piece of information stored in memory. Psychologists have proposed that retrieving an evaluation is a constructive process. Two studies are presented supporting the reconstructive retrieval hypothesis. The studies investigate the role of stated behavioral intention and post-experience information in the remembering an evaluation. The results indicate that when remembering how much an experience was enjoyed, post-experience decisions about re-purchase and post-experience word-of-mouth impact memory reconstruction. Decisions had a direct effect, while post-experience word-of-mouth had an indirect effect on memory.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Although some consumption experiences elicit deeply emotive affective reactions, the vast majority of consumption events are common occurrences which rarely elicit intense elation, delight or disgust. In the absence of highly accessible memories, how do consumers remember their affective reactions to these relatively innocuous experiences?

In marketing, overall evaluations have been assumed to be stored in memory as a piece of information available for use in future decision making. Although the accessibility of the evaluation may vary with time and the situation at retrieval, the evaluation does not change unless it is retrieved from memory and updated by the consumer. Research in cognitive psychology examining the retrieval of episodic memories suggests that the retrieval process is constructive. When recalling a past experience or an aspect of the event such as an evaluation, all of the knowledge and information that is activated in memory, including information encountered both before and after the event, can be used. Instead of accessing an independently stored ‘file’ of an event, retrieval is a process of reconstructing the past by combining information from many sources (Koriat, Goldsmith, & Pansky, 2000; Schacter 1995). The reconstructive process has been shown to include aspects of events experienced after the to-be-remembered event (Loftus, Feldman, and Dashiell (1995). It is proposed here that memory for past behavior, in this case an intention to behave, will be used in the reconstruction of an evaluation. It is also proposed that exposure to relevant post-experience information, such as advertising, critical reviews or word-of-mouth comments about an experience, can affect behavioral intention, thus distorting memory indirectly.

Study 1

Participants heard a positive consumption related comment from a confederate (the PEI) after evaluating a consumption experience either before or after reporting purchase intention. Later, participants were asked to remember their evaluation. The results reveal that purchase intention was higher in the PEI before condition, a positive comment influenced the behavioral intentions of the participants. There is memory distortion in the before condition, but not in the after condition. PEI distorts memory indirectly through behavior.

The results from study 1 provide strong evidence that the retrieval process is reconstructive. A decision, in this case purchase intention, influenced the reconstruction of an evaluation. Study 1 also reveals that PEI can influence behavioral intention, consequently distorting memory indirectly. It appears that memory distortion on the basis of PEI requires that the consumer does something with the information to incorporate it into experiential knowledge. This is an important condition necessary for post-experience information to affect memory for how much an experience was enjoyed.

Study 2

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three PEI conditions (immediate, delay, unrelated). In the immediate condition participants heard PEI immediately after reporting their evaluation. In the delay condition participants heard PEI just before the purchase intention measure. In the unrelated comment condition any PEI heard was unrelated to the film, this control condition will be used to test how accurate memory for evaluation in the absence of PEI.

The results replicate the study 1 finding that PEI affects behavior, which in turn affects memory. PEI only affects memory if it is heard before behavior. Purchase intention, though a significant factor in memory distortion for the entire sample, did not interact with the treatment condition. Memory distortion always varied with purchase intention, even in the control condition. PEI must be used in a decision to have a distorting effect on memory. It is asserted here that behavioral intention, not the PEI, is stored as an own experience fact node in memory, which can be used in reconstruction because “I decided to buy it,” provides an accessible self-related fact which can affect memory reconstruction.

Discussion

Why does behavior, or in this case behavioral intention, play such an important role in the reconstruction of the evaluation? It may be easier for consumers to reflect back on what they did, compared to recreating how they felt. In this case, the affect felt by the consumer was not the highly arousing type of affect that has been shown to be memorable (Bohannon and Symons, 1992). A decision, or reported behavioral intention, is stored as experiential knowledge in an own experience node associated to the event or object. PEI, in the form of a comment made by another consumer can be used as propositional knowledge potentially useful when updating an evaluation, especially if the person is perceived as an expert. But PEI on its own did not appear to result in distortion of memory for evaluation.

References

Memory Reconstruction Following Written Testimonials
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Consumer testimonial solicitations represent a popular marketing practice, with applications in a wide variety of products and services. Interestingly, however, the consumer behavior literature is virtually silent on the topic of testimonial effects. We suggest in this research that consumer testimonials, like advertisements, can serve to enhance post-experience product evaluations. We also examine potential discounting effects whereby testimonial writers’ insincerity may mitigate product evaluations.

Braun (1999) tested the post-experience effects of advertising for a brand of orange juice formulated to be mediocre in quality and found that consumer evaluations of this product were more positive than what the actual product-usage experience should have warranted. Applying her research protocol to consumer testimonials, which we conceptualize as a form of self-generated advertisement, we expected that the act of writing testimonials would similarly enhance post-experience product evaluations due to a form of memory reconstruction. In the first of three studies, we found that testimonial writers did indeed have more positive evaluations of the sampled orange juice than a control group that engaged in a non-testimonial writing experience. Also, participants who framed their testimonials about the experimental brand, Orange Grove, in conjunction with a special person manifest more positive evaluations of this brand of orange juice than did testimonial-writing participants who simply framed their testimonials in terms of the product per se.

Study 2 further investigated how the form of relationship between testifier and testifiee influences post-experience evaluations of the product serving as the object of the testimony. Using for theoretical framing Sternberg’s (1986) theory of love and associate network theory of memory (Anderson 1983), we detected a tendency for participants writing testimonials about the product in conjunction with a romantically-related friend to judge the product more favorably than did those who wrote testimonials about the sampled brand of orange juice in context of a same-sex friend or relative. Cognitive dissonance theory provides a further theoretical rationale as to why testimonials about relatives lead to smaller effects than testimonials about the product in conjunction with lovers. We also determined via post-hoc testing that participants’ who self-reported having exaggerated their testimonials evaluated the product less positively than did those who were less inclined to exaggerate. Study 3 then was undertaken to systematically test the effect of testimonial exaggeration on product evaluations. It was found that participants who were invited to write anything that entered their minds about Orange Grove in conjunction with a special relative, whether they believed it or not, had less favorable post-experience evaluations of the brand than did a corresponding group of participants that was instructed their testimonials should not include anything they did not believe.

This work expands our understanding of post-experience marketing messages and demonstrates—in support of Braun’s (1999) reconstructive memory work in an advertising context and Braun and Loftus’ (1998) advertising misinformation effect research—that testimonial writing also serves to sway the writer’s memory in the direction of the written comments. However, the effects of testimonial writing are not salubrious if writers exaggerate their commentary. This research also holds practical implications for brand managers in designing promotional contests that involve testimonial writing.

REFERENCES