Processing General Versus Specific Brand Information: the Influence of Relationship Norms in Consumers' Choice of Processing Strategies

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Recent work has shown that sometimes consumers cross the threshold of commercial transactions and bring the brand 'alive' by giving it quasi-human qualities (Fournier 1998; Aaker 1997; McGill 1998). More recently, Aggarwal (2001) finds that consumers' evaluation of a brand is influenced by the norms of relationship that are salient at the time of brand evaluation. In the present research, we extend prior work on consumer-brand relationships to investigate differences in information processing strategies adopted by consumers depending on the type of relationship that they perceive with the brand.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Recent work has shown that sometimes consumers cross the threshold of commercial transactions and bring the brand ‘alive’ by giving it quasi-human qualities (Fourrier 1998; Aaker 1997; McGill 1998). More recently, Aggarwal (2001) finds that consumers’ evaluation of a brand is influenced by the norms of relationship that are salient at the time of brand evaluation. In the present research, we extend prior work on consumer-brand relationships to investigate differences in information processing strategies adopted by consumers depending on the type of relationship that they perceive with the brand.

We study two types of relationships, adopting a distinction developed by Clark and Mills (1993) between communal relationships, in which concern for a partner’s need is paramount (for example, relationships with friends and family members) and exchange relationships, in which a matched benefit is expected back from the partner (for example, relationship between business partners). There is substantial evidence that people’s information processing strategies are influenced by a variety of situational and contextual factors in which the decisions are made, for example, experimental instructions (Meyers-Levy 1991), competitive ads (Malaviya, Kiesilius and Sternthal 1996), level of involvement (Petty, Cacioppo and Schumann 1983), motivation to achieve an outcome (Crowe and Higgins 1997), age-differences (Koustaal and Schacter 1997) and cultural orientation (Nisbett, Peng, Choi and Norenzayan 2001).

Our thesis that different relationship types will be associated with alternative information processing strategies is based on the premise that an exchange orientation will be associated with greater item-specific encoding of brand information whereas a communal orientation will result in more holistic processing. Prior work (Clark 1984) has found that people working on a task jointly with their partner were more likely to keep track of their own inputs separately from their partner’s when in an exchange relationship but attend more to information about others’ needs when in a communal relationship. Presumably, keeping track of inputs in exchange relationships is done in order to allocate the final benefits in proportion to the inputs but such record keeping is unnecessary in communal relationships where benefits are distributed according to partners’ needs. As a result, we expect exchange oriented consumers to keep close track of specific attributes of the brand since only that can enable them to track the balance between inputs and outcomes from brand consumption. Additionally, we expect communal consumers not to do such a close scrutiny of specific brand attributes but instead to attend more to information about overall brand benefits to assess if the brand satisfies their needs.

Across three studies we test the overall hypothesis that consumers with a communal orientation towards a brand are more likely to attend to general brand information relative to exchange consumers who attend to every nitty-gritty detail. All three studies are scenario-based laboratory experiments.

In Study 1, relationship norms were first manipulated using an inter-personal interaction situation. Participants then read a short passage about a fictitious clothing store, described using both specific as well as general information. Later, the participants took a four-alternative multiple-choice recognition test. There were six questions in all each with four choices consisting of a correct specific, correct general, plausible inference, and incorrect response. Since we expect the exchange-oriented participants to attend more to specific brand details, we hypothesized such participants to show higher rates of acceptance for correct specific responses, and higher rejection of incorrect responses relative to communal participants. Results supported this prediction. In addition, we hypothesized that since communal participants attend to general brand information, they would show higher rates of acceptance of correct general responses relative to exchange participants. This hypothesis was not supported. There are two alternative explanations for these results. First, it was possible that contrary to our prediction, an exchange orientation does not make people differentiate between specific and general brand information. Instead, this orientation prompts individuals to attend to all brand information equally deeply. Alternatively, it is possible that exchange participants do indeed attend primarily to specific brand information at encoding, but use their specific brand knowledge to correctly construct responses about general brand information.

Study 2 explored these two alternative hypotheses with the help of an additional measure, namely, recognition response latencies. We reasoned that since recognition requires search and retrieval from memory, if respondents are actively constructing the general brand information, the time required to complete such a task would be long, and should reflect, to a large extent, memory construction. However, if the general brand information had been encoded as such, and not based on construction, then participants should respond quickly. Thus, we expected the response time measure to be particularly revealing of information processing strategies in that communally oriented individuals relative to their exchange counterparts, were expected to take less time to identify the correct general information and plausible inferences. Recognition performance replicated the results of Study 1 and the response latency measure confirmed our predictions: exchange orientation resulted in significantly slower responses to the general information and plausible inferences compared to a communal orientation. Together, these results suggest that exchange orientation prompt people to attend primarily to brand specific information whereas a communal orientation makes people attend mainly to general information about a brand.

The first two studies manipulated the relationship norms using a scenario independent of the brand context. Even though such a manipulation provides a conservative test of the theory, we wanted to ratify the results with a brand-specific manipulation. In addition to this, in Study 3 we used a conjoint like experiment to evaluate people’s relative weights for general and specific brand attributes. Results were consistent with the findings of the first two studies, that is, communal participants put greater weight (part-worth) on general but not on specific brand attributes.

In summary, results of the three studies offer insights about how the type of relationship, that consumers have with a brand, influences the way in which they process information about that brand.

REFERENCES


