The Role of Culture and Gender in Consumer Information Processing Styles: Exploring the Effects on Ad Memory and Attitude

Lufang Meng, University of Minnesota

EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Two information processing styles, relational and item-specific processing, have recently been proposed as an alternative to the magnitude of elaboration to influence consumers' memory and attitude toward brands and ads (e.g. Bellezza et al. 1977; Bower 1970; Einstein and Hunt 1980; Meyers-Levy 1991). Relational processing is defined as the encoding of similarities or commonalities among discrete items. It is also referred to as organizational processing and can be induced by, for example, showing context-focused pictures, pictures of situations where the product can be used. Item-specific processing, however, focuses on the distinctiveness or uniqueness of each specific item. It is usually regarded as a kind of in-depth processing of single items and can be activated by, for instance, showing pictures of specific product attributes (e.g. Malaviya et al. 1996). This theory also posits that people with increased relational processing often demonstrate better performance in categorization tasks, whereas increased item-specific processing will lead to better performance in recognition tasks. Further, the activation of both processing types is required for optimal recall given the complementary properties of the two.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/8995/volumes/v31/NA-31

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
The Role of Culture and Gender in Consumer Information Processing Styles: Exploring the Effects on Ad Memory and Attitude
Lufang Meng, University of Minnesota

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Two information processing styles, relational and item-specific processing, have recently been proposed as an alternative to the magnitude of elaboration to influence consumers’ memory and attitude toward brands and ads (e.g. Bellezza et al. 1977; Bower 1970; Einstein and Hunt 1980; Meyers-Levy 1991). Relational processing is defined as the encoding of similarities or commonalities among discrete items. It is also referred to as organizational processing and can be induced by, for example, showing context-focused pictures, pictures of situations where the product can be used. Item-specific processing, however, focuses on the distinctiveness or uniqueness of each specific item. It is usually regarded as a kind of in-depth processing of single items and can be activated by, for instance, showing pictures of specific product attributes (e.g. Malaviya et al. 1996). This theory also posits that people with increased relational processing often demonstrate better performance in categorization tasks, whereas increased item-specific processing will lead to better performance in recognition tasks. Further, the activation of both processing types is required for optimal recall given the complementary properties of the two.

Though theoretically informative, this theory has only been empirically tested by a few studies, so it is important to further examine its viability by applying the theory to different experimental conditions. Moreover, while most previous studies focused on the effects of the two processing styles, little has been done about the antecedents. My current study therefore tries to extend extant theorizing by investigating culture and gender as two determinants of the two processing styles. Specifically, my research questions include: 1) how easterners and westerners/females and males differ in their preferences for these two processing styles: relational vs. item-specific; and 2) how those inclinations interact with the characteristics of the stimuli (such as ads) and what memory & attitude effects will occur.

Two streams of literature provide important insights for the above questions. First, numerous cross-cultural studies have suggested that westerners hold an independent self-view, whereas easterners have an interdependent self-view (e.g. Fiske et al. 1998). Such different self-views can lead to distinctive cognitive consequences such as different self-regulatory goals (Aaker and Sengupa 2000), different accessibility of certain self-knowledge (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Trafimow et al. 1991), and distinctive cognitive styles. For instance, it has been shown that easterners are more likely to process information in a holistic fashion, while westerners have a preference for focusing on single items, for breaking items into components, and for conducting linear and deterministic analysis (e.g. Nisbett et al. 2001). It seems to suggest that westerners, with a dominant independent self-view, are more likely to view things as separate and independent items and to emphasize the distinctiveness and uniqueness of single items. It follows that when processing message, they will devote more cognitive efforts to the specificity or distinctiveness of each item rather than the relationships among each item. However, easterners may be more likely to view the world as interconnected and they may pay more attention to the relationships among things or people. Therefore, it is plausible to argue that easterners are more likely to adopt a dominant relational processing style.

Second, evidence from the literature of gender differences has suggested that men are generally assumed to be more agentic or achievement-oriented. They tend to hold a preference for viewing things as separate, unique, and independent from the collective. By contrast, females are more communal or affiliation-oriented. They focus more on interpersonal affiliations and relationships between the self and others, thus naturally having the tendency to view things in a more connected and interdependent way and to devote more attention to the relationships between disparate items (e.g. Cross and Madison, 1997; Meyers-Levy, 1988). Such gender difference may be a result of the interplay of various biological/neurological characteristics and the different social roles men and women have been playing along human history (e.g. Eagly 1987; Meyers-Levy, 1988; Buss, 1995; Kashima et al, 1995). Therefore, it seems reasonable to argue that females and males may also differ in their preferences for these two processing styles. Specifically, I hypothesize that females are more likely to adopt a dominant relational processing style, whereas males are more likely to focus on item-specific processing.

Two experiments were conducted to test the above hypotheses. In study 1, both American and Chinese subjects were presented with a list of pseudo-brand names paired with respective product category information. Their different processing styles were assessed by two memory tests: recognition and categorization. Results showed that Americans had a higher mean score than did Chinese subjects in the recognition test (p<.05), whereas in the categorization test, Chinese demonstrated better performance than did Americans, although the difference was not statistically significant (p>.05). Results also revealed a strong main effect of gender as predicted (p<.01). That is, females had a higher mean score than did males in the categorization test, whereas males performed better in the recognition test. Altogether, the results provided strong support for my hypothesis of gender difference in processing styles, although my prediction of cultural differences was only partially supported.

In study 2, subjects were shown an ad for a mobile phone. It was a 2 (culture) X 2 (gender) X 2 (picture conditions) factorial design. Attribute- or context-focused pictures were presented in the ad to activate either a relational or item-specific processing style. The dependent variables included free recall, attitude toward the product, and purchase intention. Results indicated a significant culture-by-picture interaction effect (p<.05). Specifically, Americans demonstrated better recall performance in the context-focused picture condition, whereas Chinese’s recall scores were higher in the attribute-focused condition. The 2-way interaction effect on attitude was also marginally significant (p=.09). Further analysis showed that Chinese evaluated the product higher in the attribute-focused than in the context-focused picture condition, but Americans’ attitude toward the product did not differ in the two picture conditions. As for gender, the results revealed a strong gender-by-picture interaction effect on recall; that is, females recalled more ad information in the attribute-focused picture condition, whereas males showed better recall performance in the context-focused condition.

Finally, practical implications for international advertising strategies, particularly for the design of ad visual information, were
discussed based upon the findings. Future research is needed to further clarify the effects of the two processing styles on memory and particularly on attitude. It is also important to explore other ad execution methods by which the two processing styles can be activated.

References