Normative Versus Comparative Fit: Prototype-Based and Exemplar-Based Brand Extension Evaluation

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - The purpose of this article is to enrich the conceptualization of Aextension fit@ in brand extension literature and to explore the information processing underlying extension evaluations. Well documented in brand extension research is the role of Afit@ between the core brand and the new product in extension evaluations (e.g. Aaker and Keller 1990). This article questions the unidimensional conceptualization of the fit construct, and proposes two distinctive fitsCnormative fit (the typicality of the extension to the brand category) and comparative fit (the similarity between the existing product and the new product). Related with either normative or comparative fit, brand extension evaluation can occur as prototype-based (top-down process) or as exemplar-based (parallel process).

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Normative Versus Comparative Fit: Prototype-based and Exemplar-based Brand Extension Evaluation

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to enrich the conceptualization of “extension fit” in brand extension literature and to explore the information processing underlying extension evaluations. Well documented in brand extension research is the role of “fit” between the core brand and the new product in extension evaluations (e.g., Aaker and Keller 1990). This article questions the unidimensional conceptualization of the fit construct, and proposes two distinctive fits—normative fit (the typicality of the extension to the brand category) and comparative fit (the similarity between the existing product and the new product). Related with either normative or comparative fit, brand extension evaluation can occur as prototype-based (top-down process) or as exemplar-based (parallel process).

Differentiation of the two extension fits is especially crucial in a multiple-product brand scenario, where consumers may develop a brand schema in which they store not only each affiliated product as exemplar but also generalized higher-order brand knowledge as prototype. With prototype-based process, consumers infer the quality of extension products based on the abstracted brand prototype. The evaluation is a top-down deduction process where impression of the new product instance is made based on knowledge of the brand as a group. Normative fit, the typicality of the extension product to the brand category, determines the extent to which the attitude toward the brand be transferred to the new product. Extension evaluation can also occur in an exemplar-based parallel fashion. For extensions that are similar to some existing product, that is when the comparative fit is high, consumers may draw inference from the existing product to the new product, without retrieving any higher-order brand prototype information. While the prototype-based process requires some cognitive resource, the exemplar-based process is more effortless because its inference base and target are of the same level.

Brand extensions are evaluated in two stages: the first stage being exemplar-based and the second stage prototype-based. Comparative fit is necessary to activate the exemplar-based stage one, and normative fit becomes a better predictor for extension evaluation in the prototype-based stage two. Cognitive resource moderates the evaluation process: with little resource the evaluation is a top-down deduction process where impression of the new product instance is made based on knowledge of the brand as a group. Normative fit, the typicality of the extension product to the brand category, determines the extent to which the attitude toward the brand be transferred to the new product. Extension evaluation can also occur in an exemplar-based parallel fashion. For extensions that are similar to some existing product, that is when the comparative fit is high, consumers may draw inference from the existing product to the new product, without retrieving any higher-order brand prototype information. While the prototype-based process requires some cognitive resource, the exemplar-based process is more effortless because its inference base and target are of the same level.

H1: With high cognitive resource, high (versus low) normative fit will lead to favorable extension evaluations.

H2: With high cognitive resource, high (versus low) comparative fit will lead to favorable extension evaluations.

H3: With high cognitive resource, brand extensions with high normative fit but low comparative fit will receive more favorable evaluations than brand extensions with high comparative fit but low normative fit.

H4: With low cognitive resource, high (versus low) comparative fit will lead to favorable extension evaluations, regardless of normative fit.

Memory accessibility is predicted to moderate the process (Carlston and Smith 1996). Specifically, consumers who have well-developed brand prototype are more likely to engage in prototype-based process while those who have direct experience with an existing affiliated product might involve in exemplar-based process. Hence:

H5a: Given high comparative fit, high (versus low) accessibility of a product exemplar will lead to favorable extension evaluation.

H6a: Given high normative fit, high (versus low) accessibility of brand prototype will lead to favorable extension evaluation.

The experiment was conducted with a 2 (normative fit: high vs. low) x 2 (comparative fit: high vs. low) x 2 (cognitive resource: high vs. low) x 2 (order of the two extension product replicates) between-subject design. Two dependent variables were examined—extension evaluation as an outcome measure and thought protocol as a process measure. Four covariates were included—brand familiarity, brand favorability, need for cognition, and gender.

With ANCOVA and cell mean difference comparisons, the results show general support to the hypotheses. First, consistent with hypotheses 1 and 2, both normative and comparative fit have main effects on extension evaluations (both F(1, 272)≥114.9, p<.001). Their significant interaction suggests that having both fits will further increase extension judgment but the improvement becomes incremental compared with having one fit (F(1, 272)=21.55, p<.001). Second, consistent with hypothesis 3, subjects in the high-resource condition reported more favorable evaluation to extensions with only high normative fit than to those with only comparative fit (t(74)=1.98, p=.05), indicating that normative fit be a better predictor than comparative fit when resource is sufficient. Third, although the effect of cognitive resource failed to reach statistical significance (F(1, 272)≤1.46, p> .22), the evaluation pattern is in the hypothesized direction. Extension products with high normative fit but low comparative fit were more favored by subjects with high (vs. low) cognitive resource, while products with high comparative fit but low normative fit were more positively evaluated by subjects with low (vs. high) resource. Fourth, as predicted in hypothesis 5 and 6, consumers who are familiar (vs. not familiar) with the brand gave more positive evaluations to the extensions with high normative fit; and consumers who have more (vs. less) direct experience with the product exemplar showed more favorable judgment to the extensions with high comparative fit.

References


TABLE 1
Comparisons of Prototype-Based and Exemplar-Based Evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Prototype-Based</th>
<th>Exemplar-Based</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inference base and target</td>
<td>Brand → extension</td>
<td>Existing product → extension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicable extension fit</td>
<td>Normative fit—the typicality of the extension to the brand schema.</td>
<td>Comparative fit—the similarity between the existing product and the extension.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental representation</td>
<td>Prototype-based</td>
<td>Exemplar-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory retrieval during the evaluation</td>
<td>Retrieval of abstract brand associations, but no retrieval of any specific product exemplar.</td>
<td>Retrieval of a specific product exemplar and its characteristics, but no retrieval of any abstract higher-order brand knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental resource required</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Minimum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 2
Inference Process and Extension Evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive resource</th>
<th>Stage one only</th>
<th>Stage one and two</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Normative Fit</td>
<td>High Normative Fit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Comparative Fit</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Low evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Comparative Fit</td>
<td>Exemplar-based</td>
<td>High evaluation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


