Exemplars Or Beliefs? Implications of Representational Differences on Brand Evaluations Across Cultures

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - In an era of increasing globalization, the importance of understanding how consumers across cultures characterize a brand cannot be overemphasized. Successful branding strategies in foreign markets require sufficient understanding of the impact of different types of brand associations in consumers' purchase decision in each culture. However, no research in the brand literature has tackled this issue. The question whether different types of brand associations are differentially accessible and important in different cultures remains unanswered. This paper proposes to fill this void in the literature.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/8890/volumes/v31/NA-31

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In an era of increasing globalization, the importance of understanding how consumers across cultures characterize a brand cannot be overemphasized. Successful branding strategies in foreign markets require sufficient understanding of the impact of different types of brand associations in consumers’ purchase decision in each culture. However, no research in the brand literature has tackled this issue. The question whether different types of brand associations are differentially accessible and important in different cultures remains unanswered. This paper proposes to fill this void in the literature.

Recent advances in the culture and cognition literature provide compelling evidence that easterners and westerners do not process information similarly. Nisbett et al. (2001) argue that easterners process information holistically while westerners process information more analytically. Holistic processing involves paying greater attention to contextual information, as opposed to analytic processing, which focuses on the object itself.

Adapting from the findings in this stream of research, we propose that brand associations might not be similarly accessible in different cultures. Since the retrieval of exemplars, by definition, requires people to retrieve information about the context to which the exemplars are used, easterners’ chronic tendency to do so should increase the accessibility of exemplars in their mind. On the other hand, westerners’ tendency to focus on the attributes of the object and to use rules to categorize things mean that brand beliefs should be more accessible in their mind.

To test this hypothesis, in study 1, subjects from Singapore and United States were shown a number of brands and asked to do a free association task and brand concept map. Findings from the study provided strong support for our hypothesis. We found that Singaporeans are more likely to list exemplars while Americans are more likely to list beliefs.

However, as study 1 used country as a proxy for culture, we were unable to identify the dimension of culture that was driving the results. Extant research suggests that self-view (independent self and interdependent self) could be one dimension that might explain the results. Various researchers have shown that self-view priming leads to the processing differences observed by Nisbett et al. (2001) earlier (Kühnen et al., 2001, Kühnen and Oyserman, 2002). Thus, Study 2 had 2 objectives. First, we attempted to provide a more direct test of the impact of self-view on the accessibility of brand associations through the use of a priming technique. Two, study 2 also examined the impact of the different types of associations on consumers’ brand attitude.

Consistent with Study 1, Study 2 showed that subjects primed with an independent self-view retrieved more beliefs or attributes about the brand while subjects primed with interdependent self-view retrieved more exemplars. More interestingly, the results also showed that not only did the number of exemplars retrieved differ between conditions; the types of exemplars retrieved also differed. Subjects in the independent prime condition retrieved more subcategory exemplars while subjects in the independent prime condition retrieved more specific exemplars. In addition, we also found that exemplars evaluation had a greater impact on category attitude for those in the independent prime condition. This provided evidence that people with different self-views differ starkly in the information they consider in brand evaluation.

The notion that exemplars have differential impact on independents’ and interdependents’ brand attitude is intriguing. Study 3 extended the findings from Study 1 and 2 by focusing on the impact of exemplars on brand extension evaluation across cultures. Similar to Study 2, we primed subjects’ independent or interdependent self so as to make that self-view temporarily more accessible. Next, we provided subjects with information about some products owned by a fictitious brand. The product information was manipulated such that one set of products had greater variance than the other. Both independent variables were between-subjects factors. The dependent variable was attitude towards an extended product. Results showed that interdependents rated the extended product more favorably when the new product could be used in the same usage occasion as the existing list of products. Independents rated the extended product more favorably when the new product belonged to the same taxonomic category as the existing list of products.

Thus, data from all three studies provided converging evidence that different types of representations are differentially accessible across cultures and this has important implications for brand attitude and brand extension evaluation.

References