Special Session Summary   Exploring Experiential Processing in Consumer Contexts

Rui Zhu, Rice University

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SESSION OVERVIEW

The psychological processes that underlie judgments of persuasive messages, products, and the like are at the core of consumer research. To date, the study of such processes that underlie the formation of judgments has concentrated largely on the content of consumers’ thoughts. For example, dual processing theories have focused on differences in the kinds or content of data that consumers generally attend to, elaborate on, and use as a basis of judgment (e.g., central, diagnostic, or detailed content versus readily accessed peripheral or heuristic-fostering content; Chaiken 1980; Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Other researchers have addressed the role of affect, emotion, or mood on judgment formation, yet still such investigation has centered on the effects prompted by the valence and thus content of the affect (Isen 2000). What is critically missing from such inquiry is consideration of and insight into the experiential sensations that consumers commonly undergo in their daily lives and an understanding of both when and how such sensations constitute not idle by-products of information processing, but rather are gainfully employed in the construction of judgments (Clore 1992).

The research presented in this session indeed investigates this experiential component of consumers’ processing. Specifically, each of the papers explores different types and consequences of experiential feelings that consumers are privy to—experiences that are distinct from the sort of propositional or conceptual thought that dominates most consumer research. Note that the distinguishing aspect of such experiences is not their valence, but rather their perceptual or sensation-based character (Meyers-Levy and Malaviya 1999; Strack 1992). These experiential feelings include visceral sensations like those involving arousal or excitation, eagerness, familiarity, or resolution (of ambiguity).

The three papers in this session build on and expand our still nascent knowledge of experiential processing, with each making important contributions. The first paper, by Rui Zhu and Joan Meyers-Levy, begins with the notion that conventional heuristic processing may be quite distinct from experiential processing (Meyers-Levy and Malaviya 1999). As such, this work begins by distinguishing between two types of cues that relatively unmotivated consumers may use as a basis of heuristic judgments, namely propositional or conceptual cues versus sensation-inducing, experiential cues. The focal question that is investigated concerns what factors influence which of these kinds of cues such consumers will use as a basis of judgment when both are present in a message. Drawing on regulatory focus theory, these researchers theorize and find that individuals who adopt a promotion regulatory focus are more likely to base their judgments on experiential cues, while those who adopt a prevention focus are more likely to base their judgments on conceptual cues. These outcomes are qualified, however, as they are shown to emerge only when consumers are sufficiently conscious of their self and thus are sensitive to their self regulatory focus.

The second paper, by Ian Skurnik, Carolyn Yoon, Denise Park, and Norbert Schwarz, examines a particular type of experiential feeling, namely the feeling of familiarity. Extant literature suggests that feelings of familiarity may prompt an “illusion of truth” effect, a memory distortion whereby people think that vaguely familiar information is probably true, even when it was originally identified as false. These authors identify age as a potential moderator of this effect. Based on the distinction between two types or uses of memories, namely recollection versus familiarity, they hypothesize and find that for older adults, false claims tended to be misremembered as true both immediately and after delay. Repeatedly identifying a claim as false helped older adults remember it as false in the short term, but paradoxically made them more likely to remember it as true after a three-day delay. This unintended effect of repetition emerges from increased familiarity with the claim itself, but decreased recollection of the claim’s original context. For younger adults, repeated presentation decreased the “illusion of truth” effect both immediately and after delay.

The third paper, by Myungwoo Nam and Alice M. Tybout, explores yet another type of sensation or experiential feeling, namely the feeling of either resolution or frustration that may emerge upon encountering incongruent information. Previous research suggests that a moderately incongruent stimulus tends to be evaluated favorably because the experience of successfully resolving the incongruity is itself rewarding. These authors theorize that both risk associated with a purchase as well as one’s consumption goal are potential moderators of this schema incongruity effect. Specifically, they hypothesize and observe that, counter to findings reported previously in the literature, consumers may prefer a moderately incongruent product in high risk purchase situations as long as their consumption goal is compatible with the incongruent product feature.

References


EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“When Do Consumers Rely on Conceptual Versus Experiential Processing Heuristics?”
Rui Zhu, Rice University
Joan Meyers-Levy, University of Minnesota

Existing literature suggests that there are at least two ways in which consumers may render product judgments when their processing motivation is limited. One means entails relying on common-sense implications associated with a salient conceptual cue. For example, research indicates that relatively unmotivated consumers often focus on conceptual cues consisting of salient consensual data (Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991), namely a summary statistic that reflects the general public’s views about the focal issue (e.g., 70% of consumers prefer Coke). In such a case, they generally base their judgments on the perceived favorableness of this conceptual cue (e.g., they simply reason that if 70% of consumers prefer this brand, it must be good). We refer to these sorts of logic-based cues that can serve such a heuristic purpose as conceptual heuristic cues.

A second and less investigated means of judgment formation entails relying on individuals’ internal, experiential sensations that they feel at the time of judgment formation (Meyers-Levy and Malaviya 1999; Strack 1992). Here, individuals base their judgments on nonsemantic, subjective body sensations that they may experience upon exposure to some data. Frequently this occurs because they (mis)attribute the sensation to the appeal of the focal issue or object. For example, exposure to a product message that contains pictures of highly attractive people may prompt the consumer to experience spontaneously a positive, arousing visceral sensation. This sensation, then, may be misattributed to the actual attributes of the target object, prompting the individual to ascribe a favorable judgment to the product. We refer to the data that engenders such experiential sensations as experiential cues.

The current research explores whether these two mechanisms are indeed distinct and aims to identify factors that moderate when each of the two processes will be employed. Regulatory-focus theory (Higgins, 1987) provides a starting point for anticipating when low motivation consumers are likely to base their judgments on either conceptual or experiential cues. This theory posits that there are two distinct regulatory systems for achieving desired end states. Individuals who pursue a promotion regulatory focus concentrate on achieving their hopes, ideals, and nurturance needs by approaching matches to desired end states, whereas those who pursue a prevention regulatory focus concentrate on satisfying their duties, obligations, and security needs by avoiding mismatches to desired end states. Because a promotion focus prompts aspirations toward abstract ideals that are apt to promote an experiential state marked by sensations of excitement, eagerness, or zeal (e.g., Crowe and Higgins 1997), we reason that individuals who adopt a promotion focus are likely to be more responsive to and use as a basis of judgment experiential rather than conceptual message cues. On the other hand, because a prevention focus encourages the vigilant and cool-headed attempt to avoid a mismatch to a fairly clearly defined end state (Higgins 1997), we propose that individuals who adopt a prevention focus should be more responsive to and use conceptual cues as opposed to experiential message cues when forming judgments.

Experiment 1 was developed to assess the preceding notion that under fairly low motivation conditions, individuals who adopt a promotion (prevention) focus will be more sensitive to and base their judgments on the implications of experiential (conceptual) cues versus conceptual (experiential) cues. In all treatments, participants’ motivation level was held constant at a low level. Participants first performed a priming task intended to manipulate their adoption of either a promotion or prevention focus (Higgins et al. 1994). Next, they were shown several ads, including a target ad for a new brand of athletic shoes. The target ad displayed a salient headline, a clear picture of the shoes, several claims about the shoes’ features, and several pictures of people who presumably used the shoe, each annotated by a quote that extolled a shoe benefit. Both a conceptual and an experiential heuristic cue were represented in all ads, which were otherwise identical. These two types of cues varied in favorableness such that when the conceptual (experiential) cue was positive, the experimental (conceptual) cue was negative. The conceptual heuristic cue was presented via the ad headline. In the positive conceptual cue condition, it stated that in tests, 7 out of 10 consumers preferred the target brand of shoe. In the relatively negative conceptual cue condition, this statistic was 5 out of 10. The experiential cue was presented via the pictures of the presumed users of the shoe. The favorableness of this cue was manipulated by varying the visual attractiveness of the users. Either the users looked like the type of attractive people typically displayed in ads (e.g., well groomed and fit) or they appeared more average looking and realistic (e.g., less perfect facial and body appearance). Next, participants completed product judgment as well as thought-listing measures. Finally, participants responded to an individual difference scale assessing private self-consciousness (Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss 1975), which gauged the extent to which one attended to his or her inner feelings or sensations. This scale was taken because we anticipated that the aforementioned predictions might only occur for participants who, by disposition, are relatively high versus low in private self-consciousness.

Consistent with our theorizing, findings revealed that promotion focus individuals based their judgments on the favorableness of the experiential cue and judged the target product more favorably when this cue was more favorable (and the conceptual cue was relatively unfavorable), whereas prevention focus individuals based their product judgments on the favorableness of the conceptual cue, producing more favorable judgments when that cue was more favorable (and the experiential cue was relatively unfavorable). Moreover, such effects only occurred for participants who were chronically high versus low in private self-consciousness. A second study conceptually replicated and extended these results.

References
Exploring Experiential Processing in Consumer Contexts


“How Warnings Become Recommendations: Paradoxical Effects of Warnings on Beliefs of Older Consumers”
Ian Skurnik, University of Toronto
Carolyn Yoon, University of Michigan
Denise Park, University of Illinois
Norbert Schwarz, University of Michigan

In everyday life, people are bombarded with consumer information, from a wide variety of sources that differ in credibility (such as news reports, advertisements, web sites, and so on), and in diverse consumption domains (from packaged goods to medical care). A crucial task for people is to determine whether the information they see is true or false. And because people often act on consumer information long after encoding it, their memory for the truth of information should be as accurate as possible.

We argue that when people try to determine the truth of a remembered consumer claim, memory for the original context of the claim can be as important as memory for the claim itself. For example, suppose the claim “shark cartilage will help your arthritis” feels familiar to consumers because they have encountered it recently. They might trust it less if they remember reading it in a tabloid headline than if they remember hearing it as advice from their physician. A weakness of this strategy is that memory for prior exposure to a claim is often much better than, and can be wholly independent of, memory for the context in which the claim appeared (for reviews, see Johnson, Hashtroudi, and Lindsay 1993; Mandler 1980). And, when people find a claim familiar because of prior exposure, but do not recall the original context or source of the claim, they tend to think that the claim is true (e.g., Hasher, Goldstein, and Toppino 1977; Hawkins and Hoch 1992).

Against this background, we document in two experiments some paradoxical effects of warnings on older adults. We reason that repeated warnings about a false claim strengthen a feeling of familiarity for the claim, and improve memory for the truth-specifying context of its presentation after a short delay. However, detailed memory for the warning fades more quickly for older than younger adults. Once the needed contextual details are lost, the remaining feeling of familiarity fosters the paradoxical acceptance of false claims as true, rendering older adults particularly susceptible to this bias. Similarly, repeating a claim without identifying its truth strengthens familiarity without enhancing memory for any truth-specifying context; hence, even attempts to discredit the familiar claim can backfire.

In experiment 1, we examine effects of age, repetition, and delay on the illusion of truth for health and medical information. Repeated warnings about false information helped both younger and older adults avoid the illusion of truth after 30 minutes. More important, after 3 days, repeated warnings still benefited younger adults, but increased older adults’ tendency to call false information “true.” Thus paradoxically, after three days had passed, the more times older adults had been warned that a claim was false, the more likely they were to misremember the claim as true. Older adults’ results after a short delay show that they do encode claims and their context better with repetition.

In experiment 2, we also make claims familiar to older and younger adults through repetition, but manipulate the point at which we disclose the actual truth of each claim. Some participants see claims twice without learning if the claims are true or false; they learn this information only on a third and final presentation. This single opportunity to encode truth-specifying context may not be adequate for older adults, and may lead them to think that discredited but repeated claims are truer than discredited claims they saw only once. Other participants see the truth-specifying context every time they have seen the claims. In the condition wherein claims were repeated without their context (i.e., strengthening familiarity but not improving context memory), older adults’ memory for truth after 20 minutes was similar to older adults’ performance in experiment 1 after three days. Thus, seeing a claim several times before one learns that it is false does not improve memory for its truth value. To the contrary, the repetition merely increases familiarity and hence acceptance of the false claim as true.

The results from the two experiments have the potential to interfere with older adults’ ability to make good decisions and choices, rendering in important that we understand the underlying processes and their applied implications. Together, findings from the two studies suggest that people have multiple bases for making constructive judgments about the truth of remembered claims. One basis can be remembered contextual details, such as explicit “true” and “false” designations. A second basis can be partial information about prior exposure, such as experienced familiarity. When incomplete information such as familiarity is the only available cue for judging truth, people generally tend to infer that the information is true. We suggest that repeating claims and truth-specifying contextual cues enhance recall of the information’s context as well as its subjective familiarity. Hence, repeated warnings have the desired effect on memory immediately. But after contextual information has faded, leaving only enhanced familiarity, more warnings about the falsity of information are paradoxically more likely to make the information seem true. The same enhanced familiarity still helped our participants distinguish between new and old information, even as it biased them to think of the old information as true.

We highlight the risks of communication strategies that merely identify a given claim as unsubstantiated or false. For example, attempts to warn people about an erroneous, outdated, or deceptive claim may increase belief in the claim by raising its familiarity. Older adults may be particularly susceptible to this unintended effect. We discuss potential implications for public policy.

References:
“The Moderating Role of Goal Compatibility on the Schema Congruity Effect”
Myungwoo Nam, INSEAD
Alice M. Tybout, Northwestern University

In recent years, evidence for the schema congruity effect has emerged in the consumer research literature. Consumers have been shown to evaluate moderately incongruent products more positively than either congruent products or extremely incongruent products (e.g., Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989; Peracchio and Meyers-Levy 1994; Peracchio and Tybout 1996).

The schema congruity effect has been explained in terms of Mandler’s (1982) theorizing. According to this view, the level of congruity between a stimulus and an evoked schema influences cognitive processing and evaluation of the stimulus. A moderately incongruent stimulus is evaluated favorably because the novelty of the object increases arousal (relative to congruity) and prompts elaboration in an effort to resolve the incongruity between the stimulus and the activated schema. In the case of moderate (but not extreme) incongruity, resolution occurs and evaluation is favorable both because elaboration leads to more polarized or extreme judgments and because the process of resolving the incongruity is itself rewarding.

However, recent work suggests that the schema congruity effect may be of limited interest because it occurs only when consumers perceive the risk in choosing an incongruent product to be low. Specifically, Campbell and Goodstein (2001) report that although the schema congruity effect is observed when respondents think they are participating in a market research (low risk), the effect is reversed and there is a preference for the norm when respondents are asked to choose products for use in social situations (higher risk). The findings of the three studies that they report support this view.

Although Campbell and Goodstein’s (2001) findings are provocative, casual observation suggests that consumers do sometimes choose incongruent products over more congruent ones despite high social and monetary costs. For example, Chrysler introduced PT Cruiser, which sports an unusual design compared to other car models on the market. Given that monetary risks of purchasing cars are substantial, we might predict that PT Cruiser would not be accepted by mass consumers based on Campbell and Goodstein’s results. However, the car’s retro styling made it a standout and Chrysler sold 310,000 cars in the first two years after its launch.

The present work proceeds from the premise that the relationship between schema congruity and risk may be more complex than initially thought. Specifically, we explore the possibility that consumers may embrace incongruent products in high risk situations if the product fits with a consumption goal, such as differentiating oneself through the products chosen.

Two studies were conducted to examine this hypothesis. The experiments employed modified versions of the procedures used by Campbell and Goodstein (2001) in their Experiments 1 and 2. Specifically, the incongruity of a product was varied by changing the product packaging that either fit with or was inconsistent with an activated category schema. All respondents were placed in a high social risk situation and their goal in choosing a product was manipulated. In one condition, selecting an incongruent product had the potential to help the respondent achieve a goal whereas in the other condition, selecting an incongruent product offered no benefit in terms of achieving the goal.

The findings of both studies support our hypotheses. When the incongruity of the product was unrelated to the respondents’ goal, the preference for the norm observed by Campbell and Goodstein was replicated. However, when the product was incongruent but the incongruity could be resolved by considering the goal, respondents preferred the incongruent product to a congruent one.

The major contributions of this paper are two-fold. From a theoretical standpoint, we identify consumption goal as a moderator of the schema congruity effect in high risk situations. Consumers are willing to embrace incongruity provided that they can resolve the incongruity in terms of an activated goal. These findings reveal the important role that consumption goals may play in enabling (or blocking) incongruity resolution.

From a practical standpoint, our research offers direction to marketers launching new products. Our findings suggest that products be designed with points of difference (i.e., incongruities) that fit with latent consumption goals. These goals may be activated through advertisements that depict the product being used to accomplish the goal(s) it may serve.

References