The Effect of Novel Attributes on Product Evaluations: the Moderating Roles of Brand Equity and Involvement
Yung-Cheng Shen, Yuan-ze University

EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Thanks to the modern technology, many new products are developed with attributes that are novel to most consumers. For instance, a computer product can have AWLAN@, and a bottle of hand wash liquid contains APCA-NA@. These attributes are usually seen in marketing communication materials, but they are seldom properly explained to consumers. Traditional consumer research assumes that consumers must be able to understand the meanings of attributes in order to properly evaluate the product. With novel attributes, consumers must infer or elaborate the meanings and values of these attributes in order to make product choices. Much research has been performed to investigate how attributes of different natures can influence consumers' attitudes. For instance, research has considered how irrelevant attributes can influence consumers' product judgments (Meyvis & Janiszewski 2002). There is also research addressing the effects of new attributes (Nowlis & Simonson 1996), and the effects of high-tech attributes (Ziamou & Ratneshwar 2002) on consumers' product attitudes. But relatively few studies have considered the effect of novel attributes (Mukherjee & Hoyer 2001). Research on the effect of novel attributes on product attitudes indicates that novel attributes can have either positive or negative effects on product judgments, depending on the complexity of the products (Mukherjee & Hoyer 2001). Novel attributes can positively elevate product attitudes when the product is relatively simple to use or operate. It would negatively impact product attitudes when the product is complicated. Thus even when consumers do not really know the meanings and values of these attributes, novel attributes can still differentially influence the overall product judgments. These results bear important implications for product managers in their decisions of whether one should use novel attributes in marketing communications.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Thanks to the modern technology, many new products are developed with attributes that are novel to most consumers. For instance, a computer product can have “WLAN”, and a bottle of hand wash liquid contains “PCA-NA”. These attributes are usually seen in marketing communication materials, but they are seldom properly explained to consumers. Traditional consumer research assumes that consumers must be able to understand the meanings of attributes in order to properly evaluate the product. With novel attributes, consumers must infer or elaborate the meanings and values of these attributes in order to make product choices. Much research has been performed to investigate how attributes of different natures can influence consumers’ attitudes. For instance, research has considered how irrelevant attributes can influence consumers’ product judgments (Meyvis & Janiszewski 2002). There is also research addressing the effects of new attributes (Nowlis & Simonson 1996), and the effects of high-tech attributes (Ziamou & Ratneshwar 2002) on consumers’ product attitudes. But relatively few studies have considered the effect of novel attributes (Mukherjee & Hoyer 2001). Research on the effect of novel attributes on product attitudes indicates that novel attributes can have either positive or negative effects on product judgments, depending on the complexity of the products (Mukherjee & Hoyer 2001). Novel attributes can positively elevate product attitudes when the product is relatively simple to use or operate. It would negatively impact product attitudes when the product is complicated. Thus even when consumers do not really know the meanings and values of these attributes, novel attributes can still differentially influence the overall product judgments. These results bear important implications for product managers in their decisions of whether one should use novel attributes in marketing communications.

The present study planned to explore the factors that may influence the effects of novel attributes on product value judgments. Because consumers differing in involvement have different motivations and knowledge to process the attribute information, the interpretations of novel attribute information may be different for consumers with different involvement levels, leading to the possible difference in the effects of novel attributes on consumers’ product attitudes. Moreover, brands with different equity are different in various aspects, such as the pioneering images and the differential perception of innovativeness, as well as consumers’ brand attitudes. The differences in the innovativeness perception and pioneering images may affect the interpretations of the novel attributes, mainly because of the novelty that the novel attribute implies. Thus the effect of novel attributes may be different when the equity of the brands is different. Studies were conducted to explore these research conjectures. Results were mixed in these studies. A preliminary study provided some supportive evidence. However, the control procedure was less than ideal in the preliminary study. Additional replications were therefore conducted with improved experimental procedures. Null effects and effects in different directions were obtained in these studies. Results were not consistent across these studies. Thus overall speaking, the results were not very supportive of the conjectures. In this regard, the status of the present research is somewhat preliminary and is not conclusive. Future research is needed to more thoroughly explore the effects of novel attributes. The directions for the future research can be discussed in several respects. First, there are many possible reasons to account for the observed results, such as differences in the experimental procedures and the selections of materials. Studies with more complete considerations are needed to explore these possibilities. Second, it does seem that there are many other unexplored contextual factors that have contributed to the observed effects, in addition to those that were included in the present research. These unattended factors may have confounded the present results. Future research should consider these task and contextual factors and how they affect the effects of novel attributes. Finally, taken together, the bigger picture of the research calls for the need to study the inferential processes involved in novel attributes (Kardes, Posavac & Cronley 2004). Given the uncertain nature in the meanings and values of novel attributes, consumers use cues in the task environment to form their attitudes and to interpret the meanings and values of novel attributes. Variations in these contextual factors can affect the specific inferential processes and the resulting product attitudes. Future research does not just need to study the effects of the individual contextual cues mentioned above, but also needs to further examine how these cues are combined and processed from a process perspective. A complete picture of the novel attributes can be revealed only when the contextual factors and the specific processes are thoroughly studied.

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