The Role of Brand-Elicited Affect in Brand Extension Evaluations

Catherine Yeung, National University of Singapore
Robert S. Wyer, Jr., Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Consumer's evaluations of brand extensions are often guided by their perception of how well the extension fits the core brand category. This perception, in turn, depends on similarity of the extension to the core brand in terms of physical features, functions, prestige value, or the skills required to manufacture the products (Aaker and Keller 1990). Consumers who perceive a good fit between the extension and the core brand category are likely to consider the extension to be a member of the category, and consequently, evaluate the extension based on their previously formed judgment of the core brand. In any event, the assessment of fit requires a deliberative identification and comparison of specific characteristics of the extension with those of the core. However, this assessment may not always be made. For example, consumers may sometimes base their evaluations of a brand extension on their subjective affective reactions to the core brand name without considering any specific features that the extension might have. They may interpret these feelings as an indication of how much they are apt to like the extension and form an initial impression of it on the basis of these feelings alone. Once this impression is formed, it could later have a direct influence on extension evaluations that is independent of more deliberative categorization processes that might occur subsequently.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Consumer’s evaluations of brand extensions are often guided by their perception of how well the extensions “fit” the core brand category. This perception, in turn, depends on similarity of the extension to the core brand in terms of physical features, functions, prestige value, or the skills required to manufacture the products (Aaker and Keller 1990). Consumers who perceive a good fit between the extension and the core brand category are likely to consider the extension to be a member of the category, and consequently, evaluate the extension based on their previously formed judgment of the core brand. In any event, the assessment of fit requires a deliberate identification and comparison of specific characteristics of the extension with those of the core. However, this assessment may not always be made. For example, consumers may sometimes base their evaluations of a brand extension on their subjective affective reactions to the core brand name without considering any specific features that the extension might have. They may interpret these feelings as an indication of how much they are apt to like the extension and form an initial impression of it on the basis of these feelings alone. Once this impression is formed, it could later have a direct influence on extension evaluations that is independent of more deliberative categorization processes that might occur subsequently.

Not all brands are likely to stimulate consumers’ affective reactions, however. These reactions may only occur if past experiences with the particular brand (or the type of product to which the brand pertains) have been affect eliciting. For instance, consumers typically consume soft drinks for pleasure, but may use bottled water for primarily utilitarian purposes. Therefore, brands of soft drink are more likely than brands of bottled water to become associated with affect, and consequently, to evoke spontaneous affective reactions when they are encountered later. When affect-eliciting brands introduce a new extension, the affect they elicit can influence consumers’ evaluations of the extensions regardless of the extent to which they are similar to the core brands. On the other hand, for brands that do not elicit affect, consumers should judge their extensions base on the judgment-relevant criteria that they typically use to evaluate brand extensions.

We conducted three experiments to test our predictions and the underlying mechanism. In the first experiment, we asked participants to evaluate either an extension of an “affect-eliciting-brand” (a brand of cola) or an extension of a “non-affect-eliciting-brand” (a brand of bottled water). In both cases, the new extension was a pair of running shoes, which was regarded as highly dissimilar to both of the core brand categories (i.e., bottled water and cola). As such, if participants evaluate the extensions base on goodness of fit, their evaluations should be unfavorable in both cases. However, our data showed that this was not the case. More specifically, we found that when the core brand was likely to elicit affect, the affect participants were experiencing had an impact on their evaluations of brand extension, even though the extension was highly dissimilar to the core. However, when the brand name was unlikely to elicit affect, the affect that participants were experiencing had no impact on their evaluations.

These results are particularly noteworthy in light of the fact that the extension was very dissimilar to the parent brand and, therefore, the fit between the extension and the parent brand category was very low. These findings appear inconsistent with those reported by Barone et al. (2000), which showed that although the affect participants were experiencing had an effect on evaluations of extensions that were moderately similar to the core brand, its effect on evaluations of either very similar or very dissimilar extensions was not evident. Note, however, that participants in Barone et al.’s (2000) studies were asked explicitly to judge the similarity of the extension to the core brand before they evaluated the extension. This procedure could predispose participants to consider the similarity of the extension to the core brand, and to engage in categorization processes that they might not otherwise perform. When participants are not explicitly asked to estimate the similarity of the extension to the core brand, they may base their judgments on purely affective criteria, and the contingencies identified by Barone et al. may be less apparent.

Our second and third experiments investigated these possibilities. These two experiments were similar to the first with three exceptions. First, we considered not only dissimilar brand extensions, but also similar and moderately similar ones. Second, we manipulated the order in which brand extensions were evaluated and similarity perception was judged. Finally, in order to generalize our findings, we used a different set of core brands and brand extensions as stimuli. Our findings showed that when participants made evaluations before judging similarity, the affect that participants were experiencing at the time they encountered the brand had an effect on their evaluations regardless of similarity, confirming the finding of our first experiment. When participants judged the core-extension similarity before judging the extensions, however, the evaluations were based on similarity in the manner assumed by Barone et al. (2000). That is, affect influenced perceptions of the similarity of moderately similar extensions but not dissimilar and similar ones, and, therefore, had an impact only in the former case. This result not only reconciles the apparent difference between the findings obtained in Experiment 1 and those reported earlier by Barone et al. (2000) but also have more general implications for the role of affect in brand extension evaluations. That is, participants may base their judgments of brand extensions on perceptions of similarity when they are explicitly asked to consider this criterion before making their judgments. Under such conditions, the impact of affect on extension evaluations is mediated by its impact on similarity perceptions. Consequently, it only influences evaluations when the similarity is somewhat ambiguous. When participants are not prompted to consider core-extension similarity as a basis for their evaluations, however, they are likely to base these evaluations on the affect they are experiencing independently of core-extension similarity. Under these conditions, brand-elicited affect has an influence on extensions regardless of the similarity of the extensions to the core brand.

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