Brand Stereotypes and Consumer Judgments: the Automatic Shifting of Standards in Brand Evaluations

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ABSTRACT

Applying the social psychology precepts of the Shifting Standards Model (Biernat, Manis, and Nelson 1991) it is shown that depending on a marketer’s particular choice of eliciting consumer feedback—a brand that fares objectively better than another on a specific attribute can in fact be perceived as equal or even relatively worse than the same brand on that very attribute. Such anomalous explicit response originates in consumers’ use of different stereotypical standards for the competing brands. Unless brands are directly juxtaposed (objective judgment), evaluative standards are implicitly more relaxed for the inferior brand, allowing it to match or even surpass its competitor in subjective judgments.

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Applying the social psychology precepts of the Shifting Standards Model (Biernat, Manis, and Nelson 1991) it is shown that—depending on a marketer’s particular choice of eliciting consumer feedback—a brand that fares objectively better than another on a specific attribute can in fact be perceived as equal or even relatively worse than the same brand on that very attribute. Such anomalous explicit response originates in consumers’ use of different stereotypical standards for the competing brands. Unless brands are directly juxtaposed (objective judgment), evaluative standards are implicitly more relaxed for the inferior brand, allowing it to match or even surpass its competitor in subjective judgments.

**Empirical Support for an Item and Relational Conceptualization of Sponsorship**

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Many marketers rely on commercial sponsorship as a means of promoting brand awareness or enhancing brand image, and many events rely on sponsorship as a source of funding and would potentially cease to exist without it (Gardner and Shuman 1988, Lardinoit and Derbaix 2001). Despite a growing body of research aimed at investigating various aspects of sponsorship, such as potential outcomes and measures of effectiveness (see Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy 2005 for a discussion), few researchers have proposed fully developed psychologically-based conceptual models of how commercial sponsorship might function to affect its audiences. Without such models, predictions about sponsorship success can be difficult to make, and firms that might otherwise invest in worthwhile events may be reluctant to do so (Lardinoit and Derbaix 2001). This paper uses theory from the item and relational information memory literature (e.g., Einstein and Hunt 1980, Hunt and Einstein 1981) to explain how commercial sponsorship can be conceptualized. Further, it reports empirical data in support of this conceptual model, and illustrates that the model can be used to predict memory for various types of sponsorship information. This theoretical framework has been presented in Weeks, Cornwell, and Humphreys (forthcoming) and the empirical support from the current study demonstrates its validity.

Item information is that which is encoded to represent specific events or objects in memory, while relational information is that which is encoded to represent the relationships between events and objects. If both brands and events (the two key components of a sponsorship) can be considered forms of item information, and the relationship a brand holds with an event (a sponsorship) can be considered relational information, then an item and relational information framework should be a valid way to conceptualize commercial sponsorship. Item and relational theory suggests that item information is encoded in such a way that item-specific features are stored which make the item distinctive from other information represented in memory (Einstein and Hunt 1980). Relational information, on the other hand, is encoded such that features shared across items are stored, thereby enabling the representation of relationships among items in memory (Einstein and Hunt 1980). Memory for the relationship that a brand holds with an event (a sponsorship), is therefore dependent upon the encoding and storage of both sponsor-specific item information (which distinguishes the brand as a sponsor) and sponsor-event relational information (which ties the brand to the event). Congruent sponsorships (e.g., where a sporting goods manufacturer sponsors a sporting event) may be at an advantage to incongruent sponsorships (e.g., where a mineral water brand sponsors an electronics fair) in that relational information is more readily available given that a relationship is more obvious. Market competitors can also be conceptualized in this model, as sources of information (also encoded as item or relational information) that can potentially interfere with the storage of the target (sponsor) information.

The current study used an experimental design to test the predictive value of this model. Since sponsorship information is likely to be processed as peripheral information (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983, Pham and Vanhuele, 1997), participants were exposed to