Cultural Variations in Brand Extension Evaluations and Brand Dilution Effects

Session Chair: Zeynep Gürhan-Canli, University of Michigan
Discussion Leader: Sharon Shavitt, University of Illinois

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A Sheep in Wolf’s Clothing: Exploring Researcher Vulnerability
Kathy Hamilton, Queen’s University Belfast
Hilary Downey, Queen’s University Belfast
Miriam Catterall, Queen’s University Belfast

ABSTRACT
Methodological concerns surrounding the research of vulnerable consumers tend to focus on respondents’ welfare, that they are not harmed or further disadvantaged by the research process (Reinharz 1992; Finch 1984). Consequently, researcher vulnerability has been largely neglected within the consumer research literature. This paper aims to identify the ways that research with vulnerable consumers can impact on consumer researchers. Reflecting on our doctoral research experiences with vulnerable consumers, namely low income families and consumers confined to the home due to disability, we identify areas where the physical and psychological vulnerability of the researcher was exposed and the resulting strategies employed.

INTRODUCTION
Despite the heightened awareness of diversity within society during the last decade, consumers who are not deemed part of the dominant social system have traditionally been “underresearched and underserved” (Henderson 1998). Transformatory consumer research is likely to be accompanied by increased interest in vulnerable and disadvantaged consumer groups such as consumers with disabilities and those on low incomes. Vulnerable consumers are “those who are at a disadvantage in exchange relationships where that disadvantage is attributable to characteristics that are largely not controllable by them at the time of the transaction” (Andreasen and Manning 1990). Researching such diverse consumer populations can result in insights into human behavior that have the potential to enhance quality of life (Henderson 1998; Moore and Miller 1999). A less ambitious but still important aim is to provide such consumers with “a voice.” Reinharz (1992) cited demystification as one of a number of transformatory research strategies where the aim is to investigate and challenge common myths and stereotypes that persist about such groups. Vulnerable consumers are not often the subject of interest within marketing and consumer research and it has been acknowledged that further research aimed at dispelling myths and overcoming stereotypes that persist about such groups. Vulnerable consumers are not often the subject of interest within marketing and consumer research and it has been acknowledged that further research aimed at dispelling myths and overcoming stereotypes that persist about such groups. Vulnerable consumers are not often the subject of interest within marketing and consumer research and it has been acknowledged that further research aimed at dispelling myths and overcoming stereotypes that persist about such groups. Vulnerable consumers are not often the subject of interest within marketing and consumer research and it has been acknowledged that further research aimed at dispelling myths and overcoming stereotypes that persist about such groups.

Methodological concerns surrounding the research of vulnerable consumers tend to focus on respondents’ welfare, that they are not harmed or further disadvantaged by the research process (Reinharz 1992; Finch 1984). The re-institutionalization of ethical review is evident by the expanding role of Research Ethics Committees across the UK and North America in recent years (Truman 2003). Hill (1995) identified a number of issues and ethical dilemmas that consumer researchers face when researching vulnerable consumers. Whilst the protection of vulnerable research subjects has attracted much debate across all disciplines, little attention is given to the impact of such research on the researchers. Researcher vulnerability has been largely neglected within the consumer research literature. As the following definition implies, sensitive research can impact on both the researcher and the researched: “a sensitive topic is one that potentially poses for those involved a substantial threat, the emergence of which renders problematic for the researcher and/or the researched the collection, holding, and/or dissemination of research data” (Lee and Renzetti 1993).

The assumption of researcher power is questionable, rather, the relationship between researcher and respondent is one of “shifting boundaries” (Davison 2004, 338). As the title of this paper implies, the researcher is not always in the dominant position but is open to vulnerability. The aim of this paper is to identify and highlight the ways that research with vulnerable consumers can impact on consumer researchers leaving them vulnerable. Following a brief review of the limited literature in this area, we go on to reflect on our own experiences of undertaking doctoral research interviews with vulnerable consumers, namely low income families and consumers confined to the home due to disability or long term illness. We identify a number of areas where the physical and psychological vulnerability of the researcher was exposed and the strategies employed as a result. Finally, the paper argues for more recognition of this issue and how it might be incorporated into the researcher training and supervision processes.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Due to the paucity of material dealing with researcher vulnerability within consumer research, it was necessary to consult other disciplines to provide the background for this paper. The sociological arena provided some initial ideas on this subject.

Berger and Kellner (1981, 11) suggested that a defining feature of sociology is precisely what they call “a certain debunking angle of vision.” In other words, it is a frame of reference which looks beyond the visible and the obvious to what is latent, hidden or obscured. Drawing on this definition, it should be a natural progression to move from the obvious potential vulnerability of the researcher to the masked vulnerabilities of the researcher. De Laine (2000, 3) stated that during the fieldwork “researchers experience ethical dilemmas with an immediacy and personal involvement that draws on intuition and empathy, feelings and emotion.” Davison (2004) concluded that the potential to feel isolated, vulnerable and distressed does not magically disappear because we assume the role of researcher.

Marshall (1994) went a step further than this and suggested that doing research can seriously damage health. For example, Goode (2000) carried out a research project on drug and alcohol-using mothers, a group who remain a hidden and hard to access population. Using a feminist perspective Goode (2000) found that there were no strict guidelines on how such research should be conducted and stated that “I had to find my own way through these dilemmas.” Researching this group placed “emotional demands” on the researcher and the fieldwork was described as “difficult and demanding.” Indeed, from a feminist perspective, Reinharz (1992, 36) discussed stress as an inherent variable that the researcher encounters in addressing topics of a sensitive nature: “The interview process gives the researcher an intimate view of this pain and the shock of discovery may eventually force her to confront her own vulnerability.”

Similarly, Scott’s (1998) research on ritual abuse illuminated such vulnerability on the part of the researcher. In this study, the effects acknowledged were both emotional and physical. Scott (1998, 5.14) stated that “the sheer quantity of stories in the research process created a high level of stress. I had dreams about dying, and dreams in which I learned that none of my interviewees had told me the truth. Staying in an unfamiliar house after one interview I walked in my sleep for the first time in my life, and during the weeks of transcription I endured stomach cramps and nausea on a regular
basis.” She concluded that doing research can not only damage your health but also “make a nasty dent in your ontological security.”

Nursing literature identified such effects experienced by the researcher. James and Platzer (1999) suggested that hearing stories from vulnerable populations (in this case, lesbians and gay men) can be “upsetting and stressful.” Consequently, “it is rare to find honest accounts of the difficulties and dilemmas encountered when conducting sensitive research with vulnerable research populations” (James and Platzer 1999, 1).

Although there has been some interest raised in this direction it is generally secondary to the main thrust of the investigation. Historically, many researchers have tended to disguise the problems arising in the research process so as not to elicit negative feedback in terms of result validity (Brewer 1993). Furthermore, the admission of vulnerability may be interpreted by others as a sign of weakness or even researcher incompetence and thus such vulnerabilities are usually experienced in isolation (Davidson 2004).

The paucity of research accounts on disadvantaged consumers means that conducting research on such populations may appear a daunting task for the researcher and, in practice, can expose unthought-of ethical and methodological problems. More consumer researchers need to override these problems and acknowledge the presence of invisible, under-researched disadvantaged groups. In consideration of these thoughts, we now go on to reflect on some of the problems and issues that emerged during fieldwork with such groups and their impact on the researchers.

**METHODOLOGY**

Although many consumer and qualitative research accounts provide advice on interviewing techniques (e.g. Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989; Carson et al. 2001), there has been little advice about strategies to use in the case of sensitive topics with vulnerable consumers. Findings in this paper are drawn from a reflection on the research process incorporating two studies on vulnerable populations, namely the home-confined consumer and the low-income consumer. The study on home-confined consumers, which is still ongoing, investigates the consumption practices in this population through multiple depth interviews with a small number of case study respondents over a period of two years. The low-income families study examined the coping strategies employed by families to deal with disadvantage in the marketplace and the ways in which these could be interpreted as acts of consumer agency. Single in-depth interviews were undertaken with all family members. In total, 30 families were included in the study. Interviews were held in respondents’ homes in both studies.

The methodological approaches adopted, namely, radical constructivism and social constructionism, were considered effective in capturing the consumer lived experience without compounding the vulnerabilities of respondents. Given the limited opportunities for social interaction, radical constructivism offers an appropriate channel for exploring the transition from ableism to non-ableism in the experiential reality of the home-confined consumer. In contrast, the “ableism” of the low-income consumer dictates that social constructionism provides the means to explore the subjective consumer experience within a social context.

Additional supporting material was deemed necessary to complement interviewing procedures in order to obtain a more holistic picture of realities under exploration. In both studies, living diaries consisting of the reflective thoughts of the researcher were compiled immediately after each interview when the experience was still “fresh.” These diaries provided the basis for the discussion pertaining to researcher vulnerability presented in this paper.

Researchers in the qualitative tradition see the disclosure of sensitive information as dependent upon the ability to manage privacy and confidentiality with a non-condemnatory attitude. The creation of a relaxed environment can aid researchers to confront issues which are deep, personally threatening and potentially painful (Lee 1993). The implications for understanding those groups marginalized within the context of consumption rely on the researchers adopting an empathetic stance to ease exploration and knowing. Given that the two studies were of a very personal and confidential nature, it is naturally assumed that the interview is typically a stressful experience for all parties concerned (Brannen 1988) and to alleviate this stress, every effort was made to minimize potential discomfort.

**Reflective Findings**

This section discusses the transformative measures that were required by the researchers throughout these studies to counterbalance both the researcher and researched vulnerability, and as such demonstrates the inextricable linkage between both these vulnerabilities.

**Interview Issues**

In both studies interview topics could be considered as sensitive in nature and interviews involved the discussion of private and personal issues. Despite this, in most cases the researchers found that respondents were keen to share their personal experiences. Participants in the home-confined consumer study were obviously limited in opportunities for social interaction and this was also found to be a problem for low-income consumers, especially lone mothers, because of employment status and an inability to participate in the leisure lifestyle. As such, many respondents suffered feelings of isolation and consequently welcomed the opportunity to talk to someone. Given this isolation and the researchers’ empathetic response, the danger of raising respondents’ expectations of ongoing contact and friendship was evident. In the low-income consumer study, the researcher had to make it clear that contact would be over a short time scale.

Even with informed consent, qualitative interview routes can never be fully predicted and from the researchers’ perspective this created the dilemma that respondents may reveal too much information. In relation to the disclosure of intimate details, Finch (1984, 80) noted that “I have emerged from interviews with the feeling that my interviewees need to know how to protect themselves from people like me.” Particular emotional (e.g. depression) and behavioral (e.g. obtaining of illicit income) aspects of respondents’ lives indeed caused upset for the researchers and emphasized the two way vulnerability between researcher and the researched. Despite hearing stories of hardship, researchers had to ensure that they did not don the counselors’ robes and heighten the consumers’ expectations of receiving personal advice. Rather, researchers prepared in advance of interviews a list of potential organizations where consumers could seek advice and support (e.g. debt counseling).

With reference to the interview process, it should be acknowledged that when conducting research in private homes the risk of intrusion is high (Stalker 1998), given the unequal exchange between researcher and respondent in the research process. A study by Swain, Heyman and Gillman (1998) involving people with learning difficulties acknowledged the danger of unwanted disclosure or disclosures later regretted, and the need to balance respon-
dents’ right to “a voice” and respondents’ right to privacy. This highlights the necessity for transformative consumer research especially when it is unclear what the benefits to respondents will be. The overriding challenge then for researchers has to be the ability to balance unwanted intrusion with over-immersion in ‘the cause’ (Stalker 1998).

Language

Within research carried out on the home-confined consumer, particular cases called for increased attention in terms of the mode of language utilized. To illustrate this point we will consider the example of Jay, a quadriplegic as a result of an accident.

Both the researcher and the researched conversed using language associated with movement and the ableist perspective. This was employed to accentuate feelings of “normalism.” For example, Jay did not adopt discourse related to immobility and rather made comments like, “I was up since 4 o’clock this morning” or “Imagine I had to go to bed at 10.30pm on a Friday night!” The significance of this style of language, given the extreme situational confinement to bed, is apparent. For the researcher this involved careful consideration of using strong ableist adjectives by adopting a style dictated by respondent’s own experiential reality in his special space.

As well as oral communication the researcher also had to consider the issue of body language in this particular case. During interviews with Jay, the researcher attempted to suppress their own body movements in favor of a more animated form of speech. In a situation of this nature, the researcher felt awkward and guilty with respect to their own “ableism” and in order to downplay this imbalance and prevent feelings of disempowerment, the emphasis was shifted to oral communication.

Language is not only a consideration for groups “in extremis,” rather it is a compulsory tool that all researchers of vulnerable populations should be aware of in terms of its extended implications. Take the case of the low-income consumer, whose presence is more prevalent as regards population figures than the former home-confined consumer. While not all respondents complied with the stereotypical view that low-income consumers are essentially those of a low level of education, it was an issue for the majority of the respondents involved in this study. This placed a strain on the researcher to employ an appropriate style of language that minimized educational differences in order to make respondents feel comfortable.

These studies were carried out in a community in conflict where political unrest and cultural divisions resulted in additional problems for the researchers. Many of these issues arising could also be pertinent and applicable to other communities in conflict or post-conflict situations. The researchers had to access and interact with respondents coming from different religious and cultural backgrounds. While this aspect was not a major player in the mechanics of the data interpretation process, it nevertheless played a significant role in terms of researchers’ language during in-depth interviewing. As a result, researchers’ language had to adopt a more neutralized form to avoid offence and misunderstandings, which is inherent in different cultural settings within the same community. This placed a considerable strain on the researchers and demanded a constancy of thought that inevitably placed constraints on the free flow of communication.

Security

As stated previously, the study of low-income consumers involved interviews in respondents’ own homes. Although this was advantageous to informants in that the natural setting offered both sanctuary and empowerment, it however, created problems for the researcher. In the main, security was an overriding concern. The majority of interviews in this study were conducted in zones considered as high criminality. To avoid respondents encountering feelings of relative deprivation, the researcher chose not to arrive at respondents’ homes in a car, even in cases where access via public transport was particularly problematic. From the researcher’s perspective this created feelings of pre-interview anxiety in relation to the journey to and from respondents’ homes.

The primary concern of research on sensitive topics has been the protection of vulnerable subjects (Lee, 1993), and as such, this resulted in the researcher placing her own personal security at risk. Reliance on public transport necessitated the meticulous planning of routes to ensure that personal safety was maximized. Part of these journeys entailed some measure of walking and at these times personal risk was heightened due to the overriding sectarian climate evidenced in these areas. Interviews were scheduled to facilitate respondents and as such did not always fit with times that took into account the welfare of the researcher. This resulted in the researcher being forced to “kill time” in areas that rendered the researcher “vulnerable.”

Similar problems were encountered within the home-confined consumer study. For example, the researcher felt that her own possessions (an accepted extension of the self, Belk 1988) appeared alien to the research landscape. The registration plate on the researcher’s car identified it as being different to the accepted norm within the respondent’s community and therefore a potential target for sectarian crime. This became a particular worry of the researcher during periods of civil unrest and led to the systematic checking of the vehicle upon departure.

Researcher Identity

It has been acknowledged that ethnography is “a means of self-discovery and creative self-authorship” through the ethnographic process, the ethnographer’s identity is indirectly and creatively managed (Humphries, Brown and Hatch 2003). However, it is not only in the domain of ethnography that issues concerning the researchers’ identity arise. Identity concerns highlighted within ethnography will also be apparent in the utilization of depth-interviewing involving vulnerable consumers. In consideration of our studies, the disclosure of sensitive information caused the researchers to be more reflective and as such, the discovery of the other also led to the discovering of the self (Humphries, Brown and Hatch 2003).

Taking a contextual viewpoint, the peculiarities of the research arena have already been identified. Such an environment has had an impact on the researchers’ self-identities. To illustrate, the researchers have had to enter social spaces where they are confronted with and have to interact with ideologies that conflict with their own perspectives. The desire to adapt and adopt rules of social behavior exhibited by respondents led to the suppression of the researchers’ own identities.

This problem was evidenced in both studies to varying degrees. The different zones where research was conducted required the researchers to present differing aspects of the self in order to establish an interactive equilibrium. As a result, other aspects of the self were diminished to avoid disconnection from respondents and sustain an interactive forum.

The home-confined consumer study extends this aspect of suppression to a heightened degree due to the longitudinal nature of the study. Understandably, increased involvement and contact with respondents resulted in the internalization and regularization of the codes of conduct particular to respondents’ settings. As a consequence of this, the researcher’s own sense of self had to be altered during the data collection period.
As literatures suggests, the maintenance of the outer body is a reflection of self-identity (Thompson and Haytko 1997; Featherstone 1991). The importance of this upon entering the field becomes heightened when interacting in vulnerable spheres. In relation to the low-income consumer study, the concerns of outer body image were of particular significance given the research environment. Within the contrasting cultural communities, differing styles of “uniform” were evident. As such, failure to comply with the common mode of dress could have had a detrimental effect given that apparel is perceived as an indicator of one’s political and religious stance as well as socio-economic grouping. These concerns were incorporated into the research design, meaning that the researcher had to fit with the prerequisites of each community resulting in the shedding of one identity in favor of another. The donning of multiple identities, other than the researcher’s own, accentuated feelings of displacement and suppression of the researcher’s known and desired self-image.

In absence of “knowing” the rules of respondents’ social worlds, researchers encountered obstacles and embarrassment in accessing respondents’ experiential reality. In one case of home-confinement, the non-realization that all manner of perfumes, deodorants, soaps and fumes of smoking instantly created barriers to entry and consequential inclusion to respondent’s social network. This showed the importance of immersing oneself in the socio-historical perspective. This is made compulsory by the respondent’s stringent testing to judge if the researcher could be allowed entry into the respondent’s special space. The washing ritual employed by the researcher in this particular case to eliminate all artificial odors led to continual self-examination and testing for levels of smell before carrying out the explorative study.

These rules were not relaxed and all subjects interacting in this social world had to adopt such measures to gain access. The respondents in this case, two sisters, are gatekeepers and it is only through their high standards of acceptability that their social world is constructed. Obviously such measures fall heavily with the researcher to keep in an outer body condition that matches respondents’ level of suitability.

Multiple Vulnerabilities

Respondents addressed within these studies can be considered to be doubly vulnerable. This highlights the danger of defining respondents in terms of one characteristic such as poverty or disability. As Henderson (1998) acknowledged, diversity exists not only across groups but within generalized groups and as such the exploration of the human situation demands an individualized gaze. Moore and Miller (1999) noted that the inclusion of doubly vulnerable individuals in the research design may present special challenges. With respect to the home-confined consumer, a particular case scenario presented the researcher with not only home confinement but also “interiorized” confinement in terms of “ableism” in the home. Having two sources of confinement to negotiate adds to the difficulties presented to the researcher. The extremely restrictive special space of this respondent accentuated the problems that access to such a social world entails. The significance of this extreme confinement, emotionally and physically caused the researcher to maintain a constant focus on the minutiae of interaction. It can be extremely tiring to keep a constancy of behavior suitable for the respondent without overpowering and dominating the situation. In the respondent’s world, the rules that are constructed subjectively should be adhered to at all times and the researcher must acknowledge that their position within this context is not perceived as “abuse” of the respondent. This reflexive introspection coupled with the intensity of said situation together maximizes both the respondents’ and researcher’s vulnerability.

Many of the low-income consumers studied in this research are considered as doubly vulnerable. They are not only relatively deprived in monetary terms, but the added “ghettoization” ostracizes and stereotyped them as a direct result of their geographical landscape. These respondents are also stigmatized for their reliance on welfare state benefits and have to deal with the negativity projected towards them by other members of the consumer society. The researcher not only had to address the respondents’ feelings of isolation, low self-esteem and social exclusion but the added pressures of dealing with the cultural implications in conjunction with “ghettoization,” played a major role in how the ambience of social exchange was established.

When dealing with consumers who are faced with multiple sources of vulnerability, the researcher is presented with the problem of determining the most appropriate way to respond to informants. Davison (2004) discussed this aspect in relation to social work researchers suggesting that feelings of powerlessness arise due to the conflict between the role of researcher and the role of social worker. In these studies, the disclosure of personal stories regarding the difficulties encountered by vulnerable consumers aroused feelings of empathy in the researchers. For example, one respondent involved in the low-income consumer study discussed the recent suicide of her sister and the imprisonment of her son. Hearing stories of this nature created feelings of sympathy and compassion and increased the researcher’s awareness of the real need to help such vulnerable individuals. Personal circumstances like these, presented the researchers with an added dilemma in relation to power asymmetries. Careful management of the researcher-respondent relationship was required to ensure that respondents were not further “victimized” or “romanticized” (Edwards 1990) in terms of their poverty and disability.

Figure 1 illustrates the multiple vulnerabilities facing both the low-income and home-confined populations and the consequent effects on the researcher. The primary source of vulnerability can stem from various factors such as divorce or the death of a breadwinner for low-income consumers and an accident or illness for home-confined consumers. In both populations the primary source of vulnerability results in additional difficulties that also render respondents vulnerable. These factors, as well as the social context in which the research was carried out, presented a number of obstacles for the researchers. However, it is important for the researcher to enter into the consumer vulnerability experience with openness in attempting to experience it and embrace vulnerability as a reflection of the diversity of humanity.

CONCLUSIONS

Researchers working in the domain of vulnerable consumers need to be aware that feelings of vulnerability may be reflected back to the researcher. As a consequence, research involving vulnerable populations calls for careful consideration of the holistic research environment in order to minimize potential risks for both parties. Although it is possible to anticipate certain aspects of risk associated with researcher vulnerability, it is only during the process of fieldwork that hidden risks emerge and, as a result, every eventuality cannot be addressed in the context of formal training. Topics not considered sensitive at the research design stage may become as fieldwork progresses. Similarly, it is difficult to predict in advance exactly how the research will impact on the researcher and what vulnerabilities will be exposed.

Consequentially this strengthens the case for open dialogue between supervisors and doctoral students to ensure that doctoral students obtain the relevant guidance and support (Davison 2004). In other words, researcher vulnerability needs to be on the supervisory agenda so that uncomfortable issues can be explored. This is
FIGURE 1
Sources and Consequences of Vulnerability

Involuntary Exclusion from the Consumer Society

PRIMARY source of vulnerability

Low Income

Home Confinement

SECONDARY sources of vulnerability

“Ghettoization”

Lack of identity formation opportunities

Non-socialization

Consequences of vulnerabilities

Isolation “Invisibility” Stigmatization

Empathy

Adherence to respondents’ social worlds and consequent alteration to the self

Effects on the Researcher

Security Issues

Social Context
especially important as fieldwork begins and researchers are at their most vulnerable. It is also important to devote attention to issues of researcher vulnerability at the outset of a research study. Davidson (2004) suggested that when conducting research with vulnerable groups, supervisors may find it helpful to explore the motivations and assumptions that research students bring to the research topic.

Some of the issues highlighted in this paper should be considered during any research study, regardless of whether it involves vulnerable or non-vulnerable consumers. There is always going to be a researcher/participant(s) interaction that cannot be avoided in that each party is affected by the research experience.

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Product Attribute Evaluations: Understanding the Role of Consumer Experience and Halo Effects
Sylvia Long-Tolbert, Drexel University
Brian D. Till, Saint Louis University
Srinivasan Swaminathan, Drexel University

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Product trial is an important marketing activity in highly competitive markets where true product differentiation is lacking (Bloom and Pailin 1995). As a personal introduction to a brand, product trials are frequently used to gain consumer acceptance of innovative offerings (Smith and Swinyard 1982). The self-generated knowledge produced from product trials serves as an important input to consumer brand knowledge—the experiential information subsequently becomes the basis for product-related brand associations. According to Keller (1993) brand associations are the foundation of a brand’s image and the primary mechanism for imparting brand meaning to consumers. However, most brands are an amalgamation of attributes that vary in kind and whose relative importance in brand building is unclear.

We explore the influence of experience and non-experience based attributes on brand evaluations by drawing on previous findings from consumer behavior research. The extant literature reveals that direct experience compared to indirect experience disproportionately affects consumer beliefs (Fazio and Zanna 1978, Smith and Swinyard 1988). Additionally, brand beliefs derived from direct experience are stronger and held with greater confidence than those constructed from marketer-controlled sources of information such as advertising (Fazio and Zanna 1978). Moreover, the influence of direct experience on consumer brand beliefs tends to vary depending on an attribute’s specific properties (Wright and Lynch 1995). Based on the seeming power of self-generated knowledge and direct experience, the major premise guiding this research is that consumers anchor their beliefs on experience rather than non-experience attributes when trying products.

Research on halo effects, a cognitive process in which the global evaluation of a brand influences one’s response to other attributes or the impression of one attribute shapes the impression of another independent attribute (Nisbett and Wilson 1977), permits us to make a priori predictions about the influence of experience-based attributes on brand evaluations. For example, co-variation in attribute relationships appears to be driven by experience attributes, Wirtz and Bateson (1995) also proclaim that experience attributes have a potential to induce ‘halo effects’. Beckwith and Lehmann (1975) and James and Carter (1978) further suggest that attributes lacking a physical dimension or well-defined properties tend to be affected by halo effect. Hence, it is possible that the nexus of brand evaluations resides in consumers’ evaluation of experience attributes.

The purpose of this research is to identify the source of co-variation, if any, in product trials. Our investigation of consumers’ evaluation of the different types of attributes (i.e., search, experience and credence) builds on theories of ‘halo effects’ and ‘information diagnosticity. We make two predictions: (1) attribute evaluations for search, experience and credence attributes are dependent on one another and (2) consumers’ post-trial evaluation of credence attributes are affected by their post-trial evaluation of experience attributes.

We conducted two experiments using everyday grocery items (fruit cocktail and trash bags) to test our hypotheses with student subjects. In Study 1, subjects evaluated search, experience and credence attributes for a nationally-branded product both before and after trying the product. The primary measures included attribute evaluations for each of the three types of attributes both before and after trying the product. We analyzed the data to understand how post-trial ratings of search, experience and credence attributes vary when compared to their pre-trial ratings. Study 2 replicated the first study using a different national brand as the target product. The key findings from both studies support our hypotheses. First, we found evaluations of search, experience and credence attributes are not independent. Subjects displayed a systematic pattern of bias in their post-trial attribute evaluations. Second, subjects’ post-trial evaluation of experience attributes compared to their pre-trial evaluation significantly affected their post-trial credence attribute evaluation. The observed halo effect applied to both positive and negative brand evaluations. However, evaluations of search attributes were not affected by the halo effect.

In sum, product trial experiences appear to alter consumer evaluations of credence attributes but they show no significant influence on evaluations of search attributes. The halo effects we observed in attribute-level evaluations stem from the anchoring of brand evaluations around experience attributes. Consequently, the presence of halo effects in brand evaluations can potentially enhance or erode brand building efforts for nationally-branded products by overshadowing the true merits or masking the inadequacies in search and credence attributes. Marketing academicians and managers should increase their efforts to understand and harness the power of experience attributes to create unique brand associations.

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