Cue Competition, Attention Shifting, and the Highlighting Effect

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Consumers often learn about product attributes all competitors have in common and product attributes unique to each competitor. According to Attentional Theory, the associative strength between attributes and their brands is determined by the order of learning. Attentional Theory predicts that common attributes will be more strongly associated with earlier-learned brands, while unique attributes will be more strongly associated with later-learned brands. Thus, consumers will prefer an earlier-learned brand when common attributes offer a higher value than unique attributes do, but a later-learned brand when unique attributes offer a higher value than common attributes. We test these implications in three experiments.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Researchers have invested considerable effort into understanding how consumers learn associations between product attributes and product benefits (Janiszewski and van Osselaer 2000; Keller 1993; van Osselaer and Alba 2000; van Osselaer and Janiszewski 2001). One of the more commonly studied consumer-learning phenomena is cue competition (van Osselaer and Alba 2000; van Osselaer and Janiszewski 2001). Cue competition occurs when learning of an association between a predictive cue (e.g., product attribute) and an outcome (e.g., brand name) interferes with the learning about a second cue. For instance, a consumer shopping for a pain reliever may learn early in the process that a certain brand has a rapid release property and is gentle to the stomach. Later on, this consumer may learn that another brand of pain reliever has the same rapid release property (i.e., a common attribute) and has anti-inflammatory properties (i.e., a unique attribute). Recent research on associative learning and cue interaction (Kruschke 2001a; Kruschke, Kappenman and Hetrick 2005; Medin and Edelson 1988) shows that the association between the redundant cue and the first outcome (first brand) is stronger than the association between this cue and the second outcome (e.g., second brand). This phenomenon has been labeled the highlighting effect. In this paper, we use Attentional Theory (Kruschke 1996, 2001a, 2001b) to explore the marketing implications of the highlighting effect. The Attentional Theory account of the highlighting effect predicts that people will shift attention from common attributes toward unique attributes when learning associations of a second brand to preserve the association between the common attribute and the first brand learned. An implication of the attention shifting account is that the order of learning and the value of the predictive cues can have a strong impact on consumer preference for products with equally valued attributes.

In three experiments, respondents were trained to associate attributes to two different brands. Both brands were associated with one imperfect predictor (I) and one perfect predictor (PC or PR). The first brand offered attributes I and PE (brand b(E)) and the second brand offered attributes I and PL (brand b(L)). After the learning phase, respondents were tested with products offering attributes I or PE.PL. In line with Attentional Theory, we predicted that a product offering attribute I only should be more frequently associated with b(E). Conversely, a product offering attributes PE.PL should be more frequently associated with b(L). The first experiment provides compelling support to this prediction. The second experiment shows that the strength of association between attributes and brands learned at different points in time has a direct impact on product preferences. When attribute I has a higher value than attributes PE and PL, b(E) receives a higher evaluation than b(L) since the first brand becomes more strongly associated with attribute I than the second brand, which is expected to have stronger association with PL. Finally, the third experiment provides further evidence for Attentional Theory and rules out explanations based on mere-exposure and primacy effects for the results of the second experiment. By manipulating the value of attribute I to be either larger or smaller than the value of PE and PL, we show that brand name repetition or primacy is unlikely to drive the results of the second experiment. In addition, we show that, depending on the relative value of the attributes I, PE and PL, reversals in brand preferences can be obtained as predicted by Attentional Theory.

Even though the highlighting effect seems to represent an irrational learning behavior, it can be considered a drawback of a rational attention-shifting process. In evolutionary terms, it is important to protect and accelerate learning through attention shifts. An organism that does not protect the learning of a previous negative episode will have a high chance of experiencing this episode again. For example, the protection of the learning that a certain type of food is associated with poisoning or that a type of sound indicates the presence of a predator is a crucial survival skill. Thus, in the greater scheme, attention shifting is indeed a rational process.

REFERENCES


