How Self-View and Type of Processing Affect Context Effects Produced By Viewing Products on Various Display Table Surfaces

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Can the composition of a product display table elicit context effects on shoppers’ product evaluations? We investigate this issue by examining the influence of two seemingly similar dichotomous modes of cognition: holistic versus analytic, and relational versus item-specific. We theorize and find that individuals’ use of holistic cognition produces an assimilation effect. The same outcome emerges from the use of relational processing. However, differences obtain between individuals who rely on analytic versus item-specific processing. The former elicits a contrast effect, while the latter produces no context effects.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Suppose that you were shopping for a set of trendy new coffee mugs and noticed some on a nearby table or shelf. Might your evaluation of how trendy the mugs are be subject to context effects arising from the display fixture’s surface material, namely the sheath of glass or wood beneath the product? It seems possible. In the present research, we focus on an important theoretical and practical question that has been ignored in the context effects literature: Whether and how the mode of cognition that people use can affect the likelihood and direction of context effects that may emerge when a product is viewed on a display table made of different surface materials. Specifically, we focus on two dichotomous modes of cognition: (a) holistic versus analytic cognition as induced by a person’s interdependent versus independent self-view, or (b) relational versus item-specific processing.

Emerging from two separate streams of work, self-construal theory (Markus and Kitayama 1991) and type of elaboration theory (Hunt and Einstein 1981) identify alternative dichotomous modes of cognition that people often use. Self-construal theory holds that people possess multiple views about how the self relates to others and the environment. Interdependents activate predominately interdependent self knowledge such that the self is viewed as fundamentally connected to both others and the context. However, those who adopt an independent self-view, hereafter termed independents, perceive the self as a unique and autonomous entity with distinct boundaries that distinguish it from the background (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Of particular relevance to our inquiry is the contention that these alternative views about the self affect people’s cognition more generally. Interdependents’ emphasis on the inseparability of objects (e.g., the self, others) and their settings appears to prompt holistic processing, whereas independents’ focus on separating the object from the background encourages analytic processing, whereby objects are treated as well-bounded units of data (Nisbett 2003).

Similarly, relational processing is a way of organizing or integrating data by emphasizing commonalities or relationships shared by separate pieces of data. This contrasts with item-specific processing, which entails focusing on the particulars or precise details that comprise each piece of information.

We contend that each of the modes of cognition outlined by the preceding two theories might influence the context effects that could occur on people’s evaluations of a target product when it is viewed on a display table made of different surface materials. Supporting this possibility, extant research suggests that people often develop shared associations to objects (e.g., objects perceived as being made of glass or wood). While most people are likely to associate glass with the concepts of modernity and artificiality, they tend to associate wood with the opposite concepts of tradition and naturalness. Thus, to the extent that these concepts are activated by the glass or wood surface of a display table and product viewers use a mode of cognition that either blurs versus accentuates the boundaries between these activated concepts and the target product, alternative context effects may arise.

We reason that, like relational processing, holistic cognition prompted by an interdependent self-view involves perceiving separate pieces of data as related or continuous parts of a larger integrated unit. This implies that people who use relational processing or holistic cognition are likely to exhibit an assimilation effect on their product evaluations. On the other hand, although both item-specific processing and analytic cognition prompted by an independent self-view entail treating individual pieces of data as separate and autonomous elements, we expect individuals who rely on either of these modes of cognition to use the contextual data in a different way. Specifically, item-specific processors, who are claimed to focus on “highly specific information denoting a single event” (Hunt and Einstein 1981) while ignoring all relationships (i.e., comparisons) that may exist, are expected to treat all pieces of data entirely separately and thus exhibit no context effects on product evaluations. However, because independents who engage in analytic processing not only treat each element of data as a bounded, self-contained unit of analysis, but also purportedly seek “to understand what an object’s distinctive properties” are vis-à-vis the other concepts of tradition and naturalness. Thus, to the extent that these concepts are activated by the glass or wood surface and/or less natural when it was displayed atop a glass rather than a wood table. Independents, who employ analytic cognition, displayed contrast effects, such that the mug was viewed as more modern and/or less natural when it was displayed atop a glass rather than a wood table. Independents, who employ analytic cognition, displayed contrast effects, such that the mug was viewed as more modern and less natural when it was displayed atop a glass rather than a wood table. In addition, individuals who employed relational processing revealed an assimilation effect, whereas individuals who employed item-specific processing exhibited no context effects.

Our work contributes to the dual processing and context effect literatures by clarifying for the first time how and why the direction of context effects can depend on people’s mode of cognition. Our research also sheds light on both why parallels and distinctions exist between two seemingly similar dichotomous modes of cognition that people commonly use (i.e., holistic versus analytic, and relational versus item-specific). Finally, we add to atmospherics literature, showing that omnipresent fixtures in retail milieus can influence product evaluations.

References


Temporal Response to Opportunities: A Look at the Last Name Effect
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Everyday life presents numerous opportunities to claim scarce resources, however, relatively little is known about what determines how quickly a consumer will act to take advantage of such an opportunity. To better understand this, we begin by noting that children with surnames that begin with a letter at the beginning (ending) of the alphabet are privileged (disadvantaged) in childhood. We propose that children develop response tendencies to manage these inequities and that these response tendencies persist into adulthood. Specifically, we hypothesize that individuals with a last name beginning with a letter late (early) in the alphabet will respond relatively quickly (slowly) to opportunities to claim resources.

Study 1. Students enrolled in a large wine evaluation course were told they would receive $5 and a bottle of wine for participating in a 30-minute study. In line with the last name hypothesis, we predicted that individuals with names later in the alphabet would respond to the offer more quickly than those with names early in the alphabet. Consistent with the last name effect, there was a significant negative correlation between last name and response time ($r = -.156$). The existence of the last name effect for these students begs the question of whether the last name effect will exist for older adults in situations, where there is a clear pressure to respond quickly.

Study 2. Graduate students were sent an email and invited to respond by email to receive up to four free tickets to attend a top-ranked women’s basketball game. As in Study 1, the first letter of each respondent’s last name ($n=76$) their email address and was transformed into a number equivalent. Response times were measured by computing the difference between the time the offer was emailed and each respondent’s reply email (in minutes). Here too there was a reliable negative correlation between response time and the number equivalent of the last name ($r = -.271$). Thus, the last name effect exists for adults in their late twenties who were aware that the opportunity was highly constrained.

Study 3. To learn about the origin of the last name effect, we conducted a study that allowed us to speak to the question of when individuals developed the response tendencies that underlie the effect. By moving to a sample of older adults (many of whom are married and have changed their names), we can determine whether the effect exists for current last name, childhood last name, or both. If it exists only for childhood last name, then the last name effect is likely rooted in a response tendency learned during childhood.

Participants were 280 adults (average age=39.1 years) who responded to an email invitation to participate in a survey in exchange for a chance to win $500. Participants’ response times were calculated from the time the email invitation was sent to the time each participant began taking the study. The first letter of each respondent’s adult last name and the first letter of the last name during childhood were obtained during the debriefing of the survey, which was unrelated to the last name effect.

The correlation of childhood name and response time reveals a significant last name effect for the sample as a whole ($r = -.128$). However, when we compute the correlation between response time and adult name, the effect is much smaller ($r = -.070$). This decline is attributable to name changers, for whom there is no correlation between adult name and response time ($r = .000$). In sum, it seems that the last name effect is driven by childhood name, not adult name, suggesting that it derives from a response tendency learned during childhood.

Study 4. Each spring, a survey of first-time academic job seekers in marketing is conducted and then posted on the ELMAR listerv. The first posting presents job placement data for individuals who responded within three weeks; these respondents are coded as early responders. After another month, a second Who Went Where report is released. Participants were 114 PhD students who reported job placement data to ELMAR over a two year period. We reasoned that the opportunity to share the good news of a successful job search with one’s peers would be acted on more quickly by those with rapid response tendencies. As such, we expect that individuals with last names late (early) in the alphabet will be more likely to be early (late) responders.

The data indicate that PhD students with a surname beginning late in the alphabet were quicker to announce their job search success than those with surnames beginning with letters early in the alphabet. This is evidenced by a comparison of the average letter equivalent for those who responded early ($M=11.76$, letter L) to that of those who responded late ($M=7.23$, letter G), $t(113)=2.78$, $p=.006$, $d=.523$. Though individuals with names of Asian descent had last names that began with letters that were slightly farther into the alphabet, they were as likely to be on the late report as non-Asians, indicating that the last name effect does not stem from cultural response norms.

Conclusion. These studies find a robust effect of one’s childhood last name on temporal responses to opportunities, a finding that has implications for scholarship and policy ranging from issues of sampling validity, organizing structures, and the effectiveness of various marketing strategies. On this last point, the implication is that various purchase incentives will be taken up more quickly by those later in the alphabet.

References