Accessibility and Availability: the Role of Prior Preferences in Judgment Formation

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In a brand evaluation context, this study investigates the role of prior opinions and preferences in judgment formation based either on accessibility experiences or on cognitive content. With a prior positive attitude towards a brand, consumers tend to perceive the ease of retrieval experience as diagnostic, whereas for less-liked brands, consumers tend to rely more strongly on the generated cognitive content. We conclude that considering prior opinions about a brand is vital for marketers since the same response process (i.e., reason-generation) may lead to opposite results depending on the prior preference for the target brand.

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It is well established that consumers who are psychologically invested in a desired outcome tend to exhibit biased recall and to overpredict the probability of the desired outcome. (Markman and Hirt, 2002). In a brand evaluation context, the present research investigates further the role of motivational biases in judgment formation based either on accessibility experiences or on generated cognitive content. We show that prior opinions are an important moderator in predicting a person’s choice between these sources of information.

An increasing number of studies in psychology and marketing indicate that the ease with which information comes to mind may influence judgments. A typical finding is that participants perceive a person or an issue more favorably when they are asked to think of a small as opposed to a large number of reasons in support of their inference. For example, Wänke et al. (1997) reported that a BMW car was rated as more attractive when respondents were asked to think of 1 rather than 10 reasons to drive it. Such findings are seen as evidence that judgments are based on the perceived ease (or rather difficulty) of reason-generation and therefore referred to in the literature as “ease of retrieval” phenomena.

However, several studies identified a number of conditions, related to expertise, knowledge and involvement under which people are more likely to draw on the content of the information retrieved than on “the ease of retrieval” experience in forming a judgment (see Schwarz, 1998, for a review). Notably, employing the car brand evaluation paradigm by Wänke et al. (1997), Tybout et al. (2005) show that brand familiarity moderates the diagnosticity of the “ease of retrieval” experience. They replicate the findings of Wänke et al. (1997) when consumers are moderately familiar with the target brand (BMW) but observe the opposite pattern for a less familiar brand (Hyundai) with consumers giving less favorable ratings when asked to think of 1 rather than 10 reasons to drive a Hyundai.

We suggest that preformed judgments may moderate a person’s tendency to rely on the subjective retrieval experience. In previous studies, the effect of prior judgments on the target topic has not been considered explicitly. For instance, Biller, Bless and Schwartz (1992) asked subjects to estimate the percentage of Germans who suffer from chronic diseases and, similarly, Winkielman, Schwarz and Belli (1998) asked participants to evaluate how well they remembered certain episodes in their childhood. In both examples, subjects had no clear prior judgments about the topic and had to construct them as part of the experimental task. However prior preferences for brands and companies are inherent to our marketing environment and their effect needs to be taken into account to understand effectively when consumers rely on the accessibility experience and when on the generated cognitive content.

Our tenet is that prior judgments and preferences moderate the diagnosticity of ease of retrieval: With a positive prior opinion about the target brand (i.e. BMW) consumers may consider the subjective experience of reason-generation as diagnostic probably due to the contrast effect between their appreciation for the brand and the experienced difficulty of generating a long list of reasons. However, in conditions with a less positive prior opinion, the difficulty of generating a large number of reasons favoring the brand may already be expected. Now consumers may experience a different type of contrast effect resulting from the difference between their low prior opinion and the accessibility of many reasons favoring the brand.

In Study 1, we disentangle the effects of (1) familiarity and (2) valence of prior judgment in the context of brand evaluations. As a pretest, hundred and twelve students from McGill University indicated on a 10-point scale their prior opinion as well as their familiarity with the features of 22 car brands. We selected 4 car brands and formed a 2x2x2 between-subject design with high/low familiarity, high/low prior preference for the brand and “1 and 10 reasons to be generated” for driving the target brand. Hundred ninety-seven students from the same population participated in the experiment. After generating 1 or 10 reasons, they evaluated one of the 4 target brands on seventeen 10-point, bipolar items forming a one-factor scale (α=0.83). The results provide support for our hypothesis and indicate a similar pattern of evaluation for the two liked brands-BMW and Lamborghini. Consumers rated them more favorably when asked to think of 1 (MBMW 1=8.73, MLamborghini 1=7.45) than of 10 reasons - MBMW 10=7.58, (F(1,44)=52.23, p<.001) and MLamborghini 10=6.77 (F(1,47)=32.69, p<.001). The reversed pattern however is observed for less-liked brands-KIA and Isuzu. Consumers rated them more favorably when asked to generate 10, MKIA 10=5.45 and MI2SU 10=5.03, than 1 reason(s) in their favor MKIA 1=4.26 (F(1,48)=26.32, p<.001), MI2SU 1=4.14 (F(1,50)=71.83, p<.001).

In Study 2, we intend to investigate further the generalizability of the findings by manipulating the strength of the prior opinion. We conjecture that consumers with well-defined rather than diffuse prior opinions are less likely to be influenced by the experienced difficulty in generating a large number of reasons. Furthermore, we expect that when consumers have a very strong opinion, the number of reasons they are asked to generate does not affect their judgment formation. Preliminary support for this hypothesis is provided by the results of Haddock (2002) in the context of a study on subjects’ attitude towards a political leader (Tony Blair). The favorability ratings of politically interested participants (with a supposedly strong preformed opinion) were unaffected by the number and type of assessed attributes, whereas participants with more diffuse positive prior opinions rated Blair more favorably when they had assessed either a small number of positive or a large number of negative attributes.