How Personal Are Consumer Brand Evaluations? Disentangling the Role of Personal and Extrapersonal Associations in Consumer Judgments

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Research in social psychology suggests that consumers may rely on both personal and extrapersonal associations when making memory-based judgments. Building on recent advances in implicit attitude measurement, we identify factors determining whether consumers are more likely to rely on personal or extrapersonal associations when making brand judgments. In a first study, we show that consumer expertise affects the role of personal vs. extrapersonal associations in brand evaluations. Specifically, we show that novices’ brand evaluations are predominantly based on extrapersonal associations while experts’ brand evaluations are mostly based on personal associations. Implications of these results are discussed and details on our further experiments are provided.

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Consumers often write or voice brand evaluations based on information they retrieve from memory (reporting brand attitudes in surveys, discussions and advice to friends about brands, etc.). Research has highlighted a variety of types of brand associations consumers may retrieve from memory to evaluate a brand (e.g. attributes, stereotypes, global impressions; Maheswaran 1994; Dillon et al. 2001). However, we know little about the extent to which brand evaluations really reflect personally-held attitudes. One reason for this is self-presentation, whereby consumers may distort and edit their evaluations in a socially desirable way (Paulhus 1998). However, even in situations where self-presentation is not a major concern, a brand evaluation may not reflect consumers’ underlying attitudes about a brand.

A recent conceptualization proposes that consumers may hold associations that contribute to their personal attitudes about objects but also object associations that they have in memory but do not necessarily agree with (Han, Olson, and Fazio 2006; Olson and Fazio 2004). Personal associations reflect how the individual thinks/feels about the object regardless of what the rest of society believes (e.g. knowledge based on personal experiences). Extrapersonal associations reflect the individual’s perception of what other people would think—any information about an attitude object in society at large. These extrapersonal associations may be formed on the basis of information from social interaction and from the media, often reflecting stereotypic knowledge (Karpinski and Hilton 2001). Self-reported brand evaluations may be influenced by these extrapersonal associations, which may not reflect the nature of the individual’s personal attitudes.

We argue that the proportion of extrapersonal associations in memory is related to the level of consumer expertise with the brands in the product category. For example, research shows that experts base their brand evaluations on concrete attribute knowledge whereas novices use general impressions to form brand evaluations (Dillon et al. 2001). Furthermore, novices are more prone to use stereotypes rather than attribute information in product judgments, while the converse holds for experts (Alba and Hutchinson 1987; Maheswaran 1994). We therefore hypothesize that novices’ brand evaluations will be predominantly based on extrapersonal associations; while experts’ brand evaluations will be predominantly based on personal associations. Our first study tests these hypotheses.

We assessed the link between brand judgments and type of associations on which those judgments are based (personal vs. extrapersonal) in two different ways. The first assessment was a thought measure, whereby participants made brand evaluations, reported the thoughts they relied on to make the evaluation and then self-coded those thoughts according to whether the thought reflected their own opinion or someone else’s opinion. The second assessment was through administering two different versions of the Implicit Association Test (IAT)—the traditional IAT (Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz 1998) and the personalized IAT (Olson and Fazio 2004). The traditional IAT, according to Olson and Fazio (2004), is affected by extrapersonal associations that are accessible at the time of categorizing the target object. Olson and Fazio (2004) devised a “personalized” version of the IAT that taps into personal associations to a greater extent than the traditional IAT. We expect that if brand evaluations are mostly based on extrapersonal associations, then the correlation between traditional IAT measures and brand evaluations should be positive and the correlation between traditional IAT measures and brand evaluations should be non-significant; the reverse pattern is expected if brand evaluations are mostly based on personal associations. Our first study tests these hypotheses.

We regressed explicit brand evaluation on IAT effect, expertise, IAT type, and on the following cross-products: IAT effect x expertise, IAT effect x IAT type, expertise x IAT type and IAT effect x expertise x IAT type. The three-way interaction was significant at \( p<.05 \). Probing this interaction showed that when novices completed the traditional IAT, their IAT effects and explicit brand evaluations were positively associated (\( r=1.81, p<.05 \)). However, when they completed the personalized IAT, IAT effects and explicit brand evaluations were not associated (\( r=.10, ns \)). These results support our first hypothesis: Novices’ brand evaluations seem predominantly based on extrapersonal associations. When experts completed the traditional IAT, their IAT effects and explicit brand evaluations were not associated (\( r=.29, ns \)). However, when they completed the personalized IAT, their IAT effects and explicit brand evaluations were positively associated (\( r=2.28, p<.05 \)). These results provide support for our second hypothesis: Experts’ brand evaluations seem predominantly based on personal associations.

To better understand the processes by which the types of associations affect explicit brand evaluations, the next steps of this research involve experiments manipulating the salience of personal vs. extrapersonal associations through priming. We expect a priming of personal associations to have a differential effect on experts such that their brand attitudes (as measured by the IAT and explicit scales)