Consumer Expectations and the Automatic Shifting of Standards in Brand Evaluations

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Different schema-based expectations for competing brands can produce shifting evaluative standards in consumers’ relative ratings of these brands. This shift differentially affects objective (number-based) and subjective (word-based) rating scales. Several studies support the proposition that a brand rated as objectively inferior to another can be subjectively perceived as equivalent to—or even better than—the same brand. Such inconsistency originates in consumers’ recourse to different expectations for the competing brands and their automatic adjustment of expectations for the inferior brand when responding to subjective measures.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Biernat, Manis, and Nelson (1991) developed a schematic model of a “shifting standards effect” to explain the process by which prior, schema-based expectations can influence the word-based ratings elicited from respondents. Their SSE model proposes that recourse to commonly used stereotypes will change the meaning of subjective scales for respondents and thus shift their evaluative scores. This shift will not occur for objective scales. Biernat et al. (1991) empirically tested the model in the context of judgments about the financial success of several profiled men and women. When actual dollar figures for annual income were used as scale units, the resulting target ratings reflected the judges’ more objective knowledge (i.e., factual beliefs) confirming the stereotype that males earn more than females. However, when word-based scales were used (anchored by financially very unsuccessful and financially very successful), judges differentially adjusted the meanings of the anchors for the two genders, rating the same profiled women as more successful than the same men. The subjective scales effectively reversed the well-known income stereotype (Biernat et al., 1991). Briefly put, we seem to relax our evaluative standards for stimuli associated with lower expectations, and in the process “cut them some slack.”

In applying the SSE model to marketing research, we are testing whether marketing scales evaluating consumer response to brands might also exhibit the biases described by Biernat et al. (1991). This is an important issue, as at the core of consumer marketing lies the intent to differentiate the company or its brands from similar offerings in the marketplace on one or more evaluative dimensions. Applying the propositions of the Shifting Standards Model to the case of numerical and word-based brand ratings, we should be able to trace the shifting effect of brand expectations on consumer response.

Our starting point is the notion that when two brands evoke differing expectations of performance on some dimension, the observed differences in performance evaluations on that dimension may depend on the type of scale employed (i.e., numerical or word-based). Thus, product quality expectations for Japanese and U.S. electronics brands will likely favor the former, such that, compared to U.S. brands, Japanese brands are expected to be of higher quality. If the SSE model is correct, we should find instances when numerical judgments reveal this expectation, whereas more subjective, word-based judgments do not. Thus, under a scenario where consumers expect brand A to be superior to brand B, the following should occur:

H1: The use of subjective judgment standards (inherent to word-based measures) will automatically shift consumers’ reported evaluations in accordance with prior brand expectations. Given the posited scenario, brand A will be judged as superior to brand B on a numerical scale, but this difference will be attenuated in word-based units.

The next hypothesis involves the precise explanatory account and proposed automatic nature of the hypothesized shift. We propose that the shifting standards effect derives from an internally generated, implicit anchor (i.e., the associated expectation). Further, when word-based scales are used to elicit the ratings, individuals engage in an unconscious corrective process that leads to attenuation of expectation-based differences. If true, this automatic component of the SSE could be captured by measures of implicit cognition. Formally put, using the same “A superior to B” scenario:

H2: Consumers will show weaker automatic associations with favorable attributes for brand B than for brand A. However, this difference will be less pronounced after responding to word-based rating scales than after responding to numerical rating scales.

Our results suggest that a common but unconscious consumer cognitive response to brand information may significantly impact the measured differentiation. Whereas more objective, numerical scores would indicate a sustainable differentiation between two brands along a particular dimension, more subjective, word-based responses may in fact show the very same brands to be virtually indistinguishable. This anomalous inconsistency was shown to originate in consumers’ use of different evaluative standards for high and low expectations brands. In word-based judgments, evaluative standards are automatically more relaxed for the brand associated with lower expectations, allowing it to match its competitor’s advantage. Study 1 established the effect in the context of expectations related to brand extension fit. Studies 2a and 2b uncovered the automatic nature of the shift by actually measuring the automatic adjustment of standards (i.e., comparative anchors) for word-based scales both directly and indirectly. Finally, study 3 eliminated the shifting effect by bringing this cognitive heuristic into individuals’ awareness.

We also presented results that suggested a way to prevent consumers from making these automatic adjustments. By framing the word-based scales explicitly against respondents’ expectations, we showed that it is possible to prevent the unconscious shift and to obtain the same ratings as for the numerical scales. In a sense, this manipulation and objective scales in general appear to induce what cognitive psychology terms a confirmation bias, whereas subjective scales avoid this bias and instead induce another—the SSE.

REFERENCE