The Effects of Expertise on the Processing of Alignable Versus Nonalignable Features

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Three experiments were conducted to examine the effects of expertise on the processing of alignable versus nonalignable features. Participants chose that a nonalignable feature was what differentiates one brand from the other. A greater number of experts indicated that a nonalignable attribute was the most distinguishing feature between two competing brands than novices (study 1). Experts’ brand evaluation (study 1 and 3) and their evaluation of product features (study 2) showed that their initial attention was directed toward nonalignable features. The results also showed that nonalignable features became more important among experts, suggesting that they elaborated on nonalignable features more when assessing competing brands compared to novices.

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What makes a product different than other competing products? To come up with a brand positioning, marketers need to identify a point of difference that makes its product different from other competing brands. For example, Sharp argues that its LCD panels have superior response times compared to other brands, making its TVs better equipped to show fast-action programs such as sporting events. On the other hand, Sony’s Playstation 3 emphasizes that it is the only new generation console that is capable of playing Blu-ray discs and differentiate itself from Microsoft’s XBOX 360 which cannot play high definition video format without an add-on HD DVD drive. All of these positioning strategies strive to win over consumers by communicating product information that differentiates their brand from the competitors. They differ, however, in the type of differentiating feature they promote. The first positioning strategy focuses on attribute values that are different along the same dimension. We refer to this strategy as emphasizing alignable differences. The latter strategy emphasizes the feature that is unique to a particular brand. We refer to this type of strategy as differentiating on nonalignable differences.

An important question to marketers is which of these two strategies is more effective in differentiating its brand compared to other competing options. Prevailing findings in the literature suggest that alignable differences influence consumer decisions more than nonalignable differences because alignable differences are easier to compare than nonalignable differences (Gentner and Markman 1993; Zhang and Markman 1998). The current study investigates a condition under which nonalignable differences are used as a basis of product evaluation that differentiates alternative options. Specifically, consumer expertise is identified as a moderating variable that influences processing of alignable versus nonalignable options.

The relative importance of alignable differences in product comparison and choice can be explained by the diagnosticities of types of attributes as well as ease of processing of alignable features relative to nonalignable features (Feldman and Lynch 1988; Zhang and Markman 1998). Specifically, alignable differences can be directly compared across different options and allow unambiguous comparisons (Slovic and MacPhillamy 1974). The ease of comparison between two alignable features makes them diagnostic in product evaluation. For example, even a novice consumer who has little knowledge about digital cameras can use number of pixels as an indicator of picture quality in choosing camera. On the other hand, consumers will have difficulties in comparing two brands on nonalignable differences. One of the reasons is that it is difficult for consumers to determine how good nonalignable attributes are without making direct comparisons with other brands. When judging the expected utility of a nonalignable attribute value, consumers need to have sufficient knowledge to interpret the expected benefit of attribute level, and make a comparison between it and the relevant standard from memory. Given the difficulty of interpreting expected benefit of the nonalignable attribute, novice consumers would resort to cognitively less demanding task of comparing alignable attributes.

The current study focuses on the effects of expertise on processing of alignable versus nonalignable features. Experts’ familiarity with the product category reduces cognitive effort and frees up cognitive resources (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). In addition, experts are better able to infer associated benefits from attributes than novices (Maheswaran and Sternthal 1990).

This analysis suggests that despite the majority of studies that found dominance of alignable differences over nonalignable differences in product judgment, consumer expertise may moderate this effect. When consumers have substantial knowledge about the product category, it is likely that they would focus more on nonalignable features rather than alignable features. Specifically, we...