Levels of Focus: the Impact of Optimism on Consumer Information Processing

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Little research has examined the influence of optimism on consumers’ information processing. This research reports two studies exploring the effects of optimism on brand attitudes in response to advertising. As anticipated, under low relevant ad message conditions, optimists generated higher brand attitudes than pessimists when the ad format is noncomparative whereas the reverse was true when the ad format is comparative. A different pattern of effects was observed when the ad message was highly relevant. We further explored the process that underlies these effects.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Substantial research has investigated individual differences in consumer information processing, such as gender (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991), involvement (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983), and cultural orientation (Aaker and Maheswaran 1997). For example, males’ information processing is more likely to be influenced by overall message themes or schemata whereas females’ processing involves detailed elaboration of message content (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991). Few studies, if any, have examined the influence of optimism on consumer information processing in response to advertising.

For the past two decades, optimism has been investigated extensively in the areas of social, personality, and clinical psychology. Most of the previous research in psychology examined how optimists and pessimists process information and cope with a variety of situations that they face in their daily life, including chronic illness and major life transitions (Aspinwall, Richter, and Hoffman 2001). Optimism has gained increasing attention and been applied in consumer contexts. In the consumer finance area, previous research has examined how optimism influences consumers’ financial behavior, such as consumers’ investment in individual stocks, savings behavior, and economic decision-making (Puri and Robinson 2007). Moreover, studies found that optimism is negatively related to maximization. That is, more optimistic consumers feel worse off as their options increase (Schwartz, Ward, Monterosso, and Lyubomirsky 2002). In marketing, research indicated that optimism has significant and unique influence on consumer shopping behavior (Kahle, Shoham, Rose, Smith, and Batra 2003). However, little has been known about how optimism impacts consumers processing ad information.

In addition to replicating the findings in the previous research that optimists and pessimists adopt different information processing styles in consumer contexts, the purpose of this research is to investigate the impact of optimism on brand attitudes in response to advertising. According to Craik and Lockhart’s (1972) levels of processing theory, we propose that message relevance would determine the information processing styles that optimists/pessimists adopt. Moreover, the processes underlying the effects are examined.

Two experiments were designed to examine the moderating role of optimism on consumer information processing. The first experiment investigated the relationship between dispositional optimism and consumers’ responses to advertising information, and further explored the effects that underlie this process. The second experiment provided a conceptual replication of experiment 1 by manipulating situational optimism and replicated the findings observed in experiment 1.

In experiment 1, two versions of ad message relevance (high and low) and two versions of ad format (comparative and noncomparative) were manipulated. We hypothesized that when the ad message is low in relevance and presented in a noncomparative format, optimists evaluate the advertised brand more favorably than pessimists. In contrast, when the ad message is low in relevance and presented in a comparative format, pessimists evaluate the advertised brand more favorably than optimists. We hypothesized a different pattern of when the ad message was highly relevant. In high relevant ad message conditions, pessimists were expected to evaluate the advertised brand more favorably than optimists when the ad format is noncomparative while optimists evaluated the advertised brand more favorably than pessimists when the ad format is comparative. The results were consistent with our predictions. Examination of thought measures provided additional support for the hypotheses.

Experiment 2 replicated findings in experiment 1. In addition, optimism was manipulated with two social situational scenarios instead of being measured as we did in experiment 1. Most of our predictions were supported. Examination of thought measures also provided additional support for the predictions.

Taken together, these two studies support most of our proposed theorizing about how optimism and message relevance affect consumers’ brand attitudes in response to comparative advertising. This research suggests that optimists use global information processing whereas pessimists use local information processing when the ad message is low in relevance. Different processing modes were used when the ad message is highly relevant. When messages are highly relevant, optimists adopt rational information processing styles while pessimists adopt experiential information processing styles. This research demonstrated that optimists and pessimists have different levels of focus when processing irrelevant and relevant ad information. The results illustrate the underlying process of how optimists and pessimists process ad information.

From a managerial standpoint, this research has implications for advertising efforts. Specifically, when advertisers adopt comparative advertising, they should take the individual difference variable, optimism, into considerations. This research also enhances our understanding of how different processing styles of optimists and pessimists impact their brand attitudes in response to comparative advertising.

REFERENCES


