The Category Label and Overall Similarity in Hybrid Products: Matches/Mismatches and Categorization Asymmetry in Consumer Preferences

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In two studies, we examine the joint effects of the category label and overall similarity on consumer preferences for hybrid products. The results show that 1) consumers are sensitive to the matches (mismatches) between the category label and overall similarity 2) the matches (mismatches) only influence preference for consumers who engage in asymmetrical (versus symmetrical) categorization, 3) the match/mismatch construct is a better measure for consumer categorization than the individual effects of the category label and overall similarity by accounting for numerous consumer responses to new products.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Numerous studies show that consumers categorize a product based on its name, or based on its visual appearance to other products (i.e., its overall similarity) (e.g., Gregan-Paxton et al. 2005; Rips 1989). The relative dominance of the cues in categorization has been debated. A number of researchers claim superiority for the category label, stating that it is a more accurate cue for categorization, as a product’s appearance does not necessarily reveal much of a product’s purpose (Rips 1989; Yamauchi and Markman 2000). Others hold that overall similarity determines categorization to a much greater extent than the category label, as consumers are more susceptible to visual than verbal cues in categorizing new products (Gregan-Paxton et al. 2005; Rosch 1978). Although the category label and overall similarity have been widely studied, their conjoint effect is less known. Taking the approach of Yamauchi and Markman (2000) we define the category label and overall similarity on the level of mismatches and matches. The category label represents a product’s category membership, whereas overall similarity refers to the degree of overlap of a new product has to existing ones.

Our objective is to investigate the role of matches (and mismatches) of the category label and overall similarity in consumer preference for hybrid products. Hybrid products are products that combine two previously independent product categories into one product (Jain and Ziamou 1995). As compared to other products, they have multiple category labels, and overall similarity that links the product to multiple product categories. Considering that consumers categorize products in multiple ways, focusing on hybrid products allows us to examine how the way in which a product is categorized influences how consumers react to matches (mismatches) between overall similarity and the category label. By focusing on hybrid products, we extend on Yamauchi and Markman’s study, which focused on a product with a single plausible category label with a single plausible category membership.

Studies that have addressed joint effects of category labels and overall similarity have received mixed results regarding their relative influences. Rips (1989) showed that similarity does not completely determine category membership, but neither does the category label alone. Rosch (1978) proposes that the effect of the category label is supportive to that of overall similarity, but cannot determine categorization by itself. Yamauchi and Markman (2000) propose that the conjoined influence of category labels and overall similarity primarily emerges from if they match or mismatch. In case of a mismatch, consumers follow the category label, presumably as it is more reliable and allows them to link the product to a taxonomic category.

The matches and mismatches in hybrid product can be linked to product categorization. Hybrid products can be interpreted using an asymmetrical or symmetrical categorization. If the categorization is asymmetrical, consumers use one of the product categories combined in the hybrid, reaching the interpretation that the product has one main category, and a single functionality (Costello and Keane 2000). In a symmetrical categorization, consumers use both of the product categories the hybrid product combines in classifying the product, thereby reaching the interpretation that the product has two main categories and two functionalities (Goldvarg and Glucksberg 1998; Wisniewski 1997).

In two studies, we examine the influence of matches/mismatches of consumer preference for hybrid products. Study 1 was an eye-tracking study conducted using 25 students. The results showed that consumers paid more attention to overall similarity than the category label, but that the importance of the category label increased in the mismatch condition. Study 1 also showed (tentatively) that consumers who engage in asymmetrical categorization were be positively (negatively) influenced by matches (mismatches) between overall similarity and the category label in assessing their preference for a hybrid product, whereas consumers who engage in symmetrical categorization are not likely to be influence by matches (mismatches) between overall similarity and the category label in assessing their preference for a hybrid product.

Study 2 was a questionnaire (paper and pencil study) with 75 consumers. In study 2, we replicated the hypothesis concerning the influence of categorization strategy (asymmetrical vs. symmetrical) and found support for the notion that consumers engaging in asymmetrical (vs. symmetrical) categorizations are susceptible to matches (mismatches). We also extended the applicability of the match/mismatch hypothesis to product characteristics, and showed that consumers are influenced by matches (mismatches) between the category label and overall similarity when assessing a product’s net benefits and complexity. A match between the category label and overall similarity resulted in more benefits and less perceived complexity for a new hybrid product. Further, by comparing the match/mismatch hypothesis to the individual effects of the category label and overall similarity, we show that matches/mismatches account for a larger number of consumer responses to new products than the individual effects of the category label or overall similarity.

Taken together, the results provide support for the match/mismatch hypothesis in assessing the importance of the category label and overall similarity in consumer preferences.

REFERENCES


