The Evaluation of New Utilitarian and Symbolic Products: the Effect of Attribute Type and Product Knowledge

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Nowadays, companies manage to introduce new products whose success depends on the consumer’s response, which is motivated by the consumer’s evaluation. In this paper, we analyze the effect of the addition of three types of new attributes to a product (beneficial and image attributes and characteristics), with utilitarian or symbolic meaning, on its evaluation, and how this effect is moderated by product knowledge. Results show that the impact of attribute type and product knowledge depends on product meaning.

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Abstract

Companies introduce new products whose success depends on consumer’s product evaluation. In this paper, we analyze the effect of the addition of three types of new attributes to a product (beneficial and image attributes and characteristics), with utilitarian or symbolic meaning, on its evaluation, and how this effect is moderated by product knowledge. Results show that the impact of attribute type and product knowledge depends on product meaning.

Introduction

The introduction of new attributes is one of the most common methods for developing new products. The impact of a new feature or attribute on product evaluation depends on the characteristics of the feature itself, the type of product to which the feature is added, the characteristics of the buying task, and other factors such as the marketing strategy or the competitive and social environment (Nowlis and Simonson, 1996). Besides the important stream of research which has already analyzed the impact of new attributes on new product evaluation (Mukherjee and Hoyer, 2001; Brown and Carpenter, 2000), little is known about the interaction effect of the different attributes added and the other factors. Focusing on the first two factors proposed by Nowlis and Simonson (1996), we propose that the impact of a new feature on new product evaluation must be analyzed considering not only the type of attribute and the type of product (in our case utilitarian or symbolic) as intrinsic elements to the product development, but also by individual factors, such as product knowledge.

The effect of the addition of new characteristics, beneficial attributes and image attributes on the evaluation of utilitarian and symbolic products

Although marketing literature has analyzed different attributes of products, Lefkoff-Hagius and Mason (1993) concluded that product attributes presented in marketing research (Hauser and Clausing, 1988; Hirschman, 1980) can be classified into three types: characteristics, beneficial attributes, and image attributes. These authors defined characteristics as those attributes related to physical properties, beneficial attributes as those related to the task or outcome referent, and image attributes as those which possess symbolic meaning (Meenaghan, 1995), and are related with visual (Eckman and Wagner, 1994) and promotional aspects. More recent classifications, as those presented by Veryzer (1998) and Michaut et al. (2002) are somehow equivalent to that of Lefkoff-Hagius and Mason.

Literature disagrees concerning the importance of the three kinds of attributes on product evaluation. Some authors, as Meenaghan (1995), Eckman and Wagner (1994), and Michaut et al. (2002), concluded that consumers tend to show a higher preference for image attributes than for functional aspects of the product. However, Hirschman (1987) and Moreau et al. (2001) concede more significance to technological and performance aspects. This discrepancy can be explained by product meaning. One of the most accepted classifications...
distinguishes two kinds of products, functional or utilitarian and symbolics. It arises as a result of the existence of two individual necessities, functional ones, related to specific problems, and symbolic ones, that are the expression of self-image and social identification (Park et al., 1986). Then, functional products are those that possess some tangible characteristics that offer benefits to consumers (Fournier, 1991; Park et al., 1991; Bhat and Reddy, 1998; Kempf, 1999; Addis and Holbrook, 2002; Del Rio et al., 2001), or have the ability to accomplish specific acts, based on properties such as their physical characteristics and features (Fournier 1991). Symbolic products are used to signify social position and/or self identity, not for functional benefits (Hirschman, 1981; Levy, 1959).

Literature related to the effect of different attributes on product evaluation observed a greater impact of brand name, compared to product benefits, on products with symbolic meaning (Del Rio et al, 2001), while functional products tend to be evaluated on tangible features and cost, then secondarily on their intangible/image attributes (Sirgy and Johar, 1985). Furthermore, in their study centered in brand extensions, Park et al. (1991) found more favourable consumers’ reaction when the new attribute is consistent with the brand concept. As such, consumers display a more positive reaction to functional than prestige extensions for functional brands, and to prestige than functional extensions for prestige brands. Therefore, applying this consistency to the combination of attribute types and product meanings as described above, we propose:

\[ H1: \text{Compared with the case where the new attribute is absent, the presence of a new characteristic or benefit in functional products increases the product evaluation more than the presence of a new image attribute.} \]

\[ H2: \text{Compared with the case where the new attribute is absent, the presence of a new image attribute in symbolic products increases product evaluation more than the presence of a new characteristic or benefit.} \]

**Product knowledge and its effects on new product evaluation**

Within the context of the adoption of innovations, marketing literature has highlighted the significant influence of knowledge on consumer’s decisions (Saaksjarvi, 2003; Gatignon and Robertson, 1991; Alba and Hutchinson, 1987). Pre-existing knowledge of a product or service category determines the evaluation of new products with it (Saaksjarvi, 2003; De Bont and Schoormans, 1995). Product knowledge depends on the quantity of specific knowledge acquired by experience or training (Wood and Lynch, 2002). This influences the ability to understand and interpret information about products (Balabanis and Reynolds, 2001; MacInnis and Jaworski, 1989).

Based on Saaksjarvi’s analogical learning theory, expert subjects value products upon new functions and intrinsic characteristics of the product (such as characteristics and benefits), while non experts based their evaluation on physical aspects (such as image attributes). Therefore, even when individuals value new products based on analogies (where there are no shared physical attributes), experts center their evaluation, mostly, on functional attributes, perceiving more utility (Irani, 2000), while non experts do it based on superficial or visible aspects of the product (Roehm and Sternthal, 2001; Roehm et al., 1999).

However, the degree of preference for functional attributes will be determined by product meaning. For utilitarian products, the understanding of new characteristics and new benefits will determine consumer decisions, but not for symbolic products, where those attributes lose importance in favour of image attributes. As such, for expert subjects, the difference of new utilitarian product evaluation obtained by the introduction of new characteristics and beneficial attributes will be higher than for non-experts. On the other hand, for symbolic products there will be no difference between experts and non-experts on product evaluation when new attributes are added, due to the fact that the image attribute (more valued for non-experts subjects) will be equally understandable for both experts and non-experts.

\[ H3: \text{The improvement on product evaluation based on the presence of a new characteristic or benefit in utilitarian products is higher for experts than for non-experts} \]

\[ H4: \text{The improvement on product evaluation based on the presence of a new attribute (characteristic, benefit or image attribute) in symbolic products does not differ for experts and non-experts} \]

**Method**

In order to choose a utilitarian and a symbolic product, a questionnaire was administered to forty students to evaluate different products (Allen and Ng, 2002; Allen and Ng, 1999). The product with the most utilitarian meaning was a personal computer and the one with the most symbolic meaning was a pair of casual sport shoes. To distinguish between characteristics, benefits and image attributes, a pretest was conducted with sixty students to classify a list of attributes related to PCs and casual sport shoes. In order to choose the new attributes, a new pretest was conducted to select the ones with the highest evaluation in the three categories and for both products.

To test the above hypotheses, three hundred and fourteen students participated in the 2 x 2 x 3 experiment: high vs. low product knowledge; utilitarian and symbolic product; and the three attribute types, characteristics and benefits vs. image.

All participants received a questionnaire booklet. The first page presented the product (a PC or a pair of casual sport shoes), which provided eight attributes without brand name. The selection of attributes included was based on the analysis of real ads and interviews with some experts. Then, they were asked to evaluate the product on a six-item, seven-point scale anchored by “bad/good”, “like/dislike”, “not useful/useful”, “desirable/undesirable”, “high quality/low quality”, “favourable/unfavourable” (Mukherjee and Hoyer, 2001). After completing this initial evaluation, they were asked to provide some information related to product meaning and product knowledge (Smith and Park, 1992). The last page showed a new product. Fifty-three students evaluated a new PC with a new characteristic (Intel Pentium V), fifty-one with a new beneficial attribute (SODIMM SDRAM DDR NP CL2.5 PC2100 of 512MB for Thinkpad) and forty-six with a new design in PCs, presented with the slogan “Dimension 4600C, the PC for those who enjoy the future, nowadays” (Leffkoff-Hagius and Mason, 1993). Concerning the symbolic product, a total of forty-three students completed the questionnaire with the new pair of casual sport shoes with a new characteristic (Ultralite midsole), forty-four with the new beneficial attribute (CLIMAWARM) and forty-six with a new design in shoes presented with the slogan “Columbia 23, for those who want something different”. All brand names were fictitious. Although real products did not have the combination of characteristics set in the questionnaire, all of the attributes were real and exist in the market. Therefore, the level of novelty of each new attribute was analized, and they obtained very similar values.
Results

We used ANOVA to test the hypotheses. Results show that the improvement on evaluation of utilitarian products based on the additional introduction of a new characteristic or a new beneficial attribute was higher than when a new image attribute was added (M_C = 0.64 vs. M_D = 0.54, p = 0.02; M_E vs. M_F = 0.10, p = 0.02; M_B vs. M_F = 0.07, p = 0.05), providing support for hypothesis H1. For the symbolic product, the presence of the new image attribute was similarly valued to the added new characteristic or new beneficial attribute (M_C = 0.37 vs. M_D = 0.28, p = 0.02; M_E vs. M_F = 0.38, p = 0.02; M_B vs. M_F = 0.29, p = 0.05). Therefore, hypothesis H2 was not supported.

In order to test hypotheses H3 and H4, the sample was divided into two levels of product knowledge. High product knowledge level was attributed to those individuals who scored higher than the median. The rest were classified as non-experts.

For the utilitarian product, evaluation improvements based on the addition of the new beneficial attribute was higher for experts than for non-experts (M_expert = 0.73 vs. M_non-expert = 0.26; p = 0.05), but there were no significant differences on evaluation improvements when the new characteristic (M_expert = 0.58 vs. M_non-expert = 0.73; p = 0.29) or the new image attribute were incorporated (M_expert = 0.23 vs. M_non-expert = 0.03; p = 0.56), which partially supported H3. For the symbolic product, evaluation improvements of expert and non-experts were similar when adding a new characteristic (M_expert = 0.30 vs. M_non-expert = 0.43; p = 0.61), a new beneficial attribute (M_expert = 0.18 vs. M_non-expert = 0.35; p = 0.34) and a new image attribute (M_expert = 0.27 vs. M_non-expert = 0.45; p = 0.47), which provided support for H4.

References


