The Impact of Semantic Vs. Lexical Relations on the Strength of Inter-Brand Linkages

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Brands in consumers’ memory can be linked by both semantic similarities such as common product attributes (e.g., KitKat-Smarties) and lexical similarities such as phonetically or orthographically similar brand names (e.g., Nescafe-Nestea). We propose that brand linkages based on these two types of relations have different levels of strength, depending on the manner in which brand information was learned. Specifically, we propose that semantic linkages will be stronger when consumers learn interrelations between brands in a high task involvement condition, whereas lexical linkages will be stronger when consumers rely on heuristics to associate brands in a low task involvement condition.

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who read the sacred debaseing statement chose the high-price, high-quality option only 41% of the time, a significantly different proportion than the control.

The project has implications for when and how policy makers and consumer advocates should intervene on behalf of consumers. Specifically, we address how interventions that simply encourage rational economic behavior of consumers without removing the taboo nature of the exchange may not be as effective as interventions that take into account the value-signaling role money in the evaluation of sacred purchases.

References

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Research Background and Hypotheses
Brands are not cognitively independent in the way that consumers store them in memory. Rather, due to a variety of reasons, including common product category or common features, similar trade dress and design, similar or related advertising, complementary usage, and even proximate shelf location, consumers may establish associative linkages between brands to help them navigate the “brandscape” in which they consume. The strength of these linkages are said to be an important predictor of the magnitude of spillover effects in which external information (e.g. advertising or negative news) about a brand can change evaluations of related brands that are not directly implicated (Lei et al. 2008; Roehm and Tybouts 2006). Therefore, it becomes important to understand what determines the strength of associative linkages between brands.

Prior research has primarily examined brand-related linkages based on semantic similarities such as common product features and shared product category (e.g., KitKat-Smarties). However, brands may also be linked through more superficial lexical similarities such as phonetically or orthographically similar brand names (e.g., Nescafe-Nestea). We propose that brand linkages based on these two types of relations (i.e. semantic vs. lexical) have different levels of strength, depending on the manner in which brand information was learned. Specifically, we propose that semantic linkages will be stronger when consumers learn interrelations between brands in a high task involvement condition, whereas lexical linkages will be stronger when consumers rely on heuristics to associate brands in a low task involvement condition. These propositions are explained in detail below.

Associative network theory (Collins and Loftus 1975) suggests that consumers organize information in networks that represent both associative and lexical (phonemic and orthographic similarities) relationships (e.g., Maid-Made) (see also Hennesssey et al. 2005). These associations are encoded or learned through exposure to, and elaboration of information in the environment (Gardial and Biehal 1985). A critical aspect of the learning process is the level of task involvement (Petty and Cacioppo 1981). Task involvement determines the cognitive capacity allocated to the encoding and, therefore, the extent of elaboration that the information receives (Schmitt et al. 1993). In particular, high task involvement is characterized by a thoughtful, intentional learning process that allows elaboration of...
the stimulus information (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). In contrast, under low involvement, product/brand information may be learned incidentally with little cognitive effort or elaboration.

Therefore, when brand information is learned under high (vs. low) task involvement, consumers are more likely to rely on “deep” (vs. “surface”) cues to establish links between new and existing brand information. “Deep” cues include abstract, underlying functional properties of a brand such as product and category similarity, and common or complementary usage, whereas “surface” cues refer to more concrete, sensory properties of the brand such as the linguistic characteristics of brand names, and the color of the product and its package (Zhang and Sood 2002). The elaboration of “deep” cues is facilitated by systematic processing but requires more cognitive effort, whereas “surface” cues are often used as heuristics, with little effort involved. We propose that linkages based on semantic relations will be stronger when consumers learn interrelations between brands in a high involvement condition. However, lexical linkages will be stronger when consumers rely on heuristics to associate brands in a low involvement condition.

Experiment and Results

To test the impact of semantic vs. lexical relations between brands, we developed a fictitious brand Nestello (a chocolate candy bar). Nestello is lexically linked with brands such as Nescafé but semantically linked with brands such as KitKat (we also developed seven other filler brands). Each fictitious brand was presented on a card describing information such as the product category, the company, and the brand name, and each card was printed in a different font and size. Eighty subjects were randomly assigned to a 2 (high vs. low task involvement) X 2 (lexical vs. semantic relation) between-subjects ANOVA design. Following established practice (Schmitt et al. 1993), we manipulated the level of task involvement by instructing subjects to focus on either the information presented or the font and size of the text information on each card. Strength of association between brands was measured using a computer-assisted response time sequential priming method (e.g., Bargh and Chartrand 2000; Herr et al. 1996).

The results showed a significant interaction term (F(1, 72)=25.38, p<0.001) between task involvement and type of relations between brands. Specifically, the Nestello-to-KitKat association (semantic relation) was significantly stronger in the high involvement condition than in the low involvement condition (5.95 vs. 5.05, p<0.05), whereas the Nestello-to-Nescafé association (lexical relation) was significantly stronger in the low involvement condition than in the high involvement condition (4.53 vs. 3.40, p<0.05). Thus our hypotheses were supported.

Implications

The above finding suggests that consumers rely on different types of cues (semantic vs. lexical) to establish brand associations in different learning environment. In other words, the strength of a linkage is influenced by not only the type of relations between brands, but also the cognitive process through which the linkage is initially established. Our finding also suggests that surface-level lexical attributes are important conduits through which brands can be associated in memory. It implies that lexical similarities can help firms position a new brand closely to an established brand for positive halo effects, irrespective of whether the new brand is in the same or a different product category. However, it also suggests that the scope of contamination imposed by a negative message may be larger than what is normally expected. For example, a brand that seems to be “unrelated” due to the absence of semantic similarities, may nevertheless be affected by the negative information about a related brand through lexical linkages. To further test this, we are conducting follow up studies to examine the impact of semantic vs. lexical brand linkages on spillover effects between brands. Overall, this research shows that the lexical attributes of a brand, which have not received much attention in previous research, can have significant influence on the cognitive structure of inter-brand linkages.

References


