Mental Simulation and the Evaluation of New Products: the Affective and Cognitive Dimensions of Process- Versus Outcome-Focused Thoughts

Min Zhao, University of Toronto, Canada
Steve Hoeffler, Vanderbilt University, USA
Gal Zauberman, University of Pennsylvania, USA

In this research we examine the role of process vs. outcome-focused mental simulation in new product evaluation. We first show that consumers naturally focus on product benefits when they evaluate incrementally new products (INPs), but have a more balanced focus on both the benefits and process of using the product for really new products (RNPs). Based on these natural evaluation tendencies, we demonstrate that while evoking process simulation has no impact on RNPs, for INPs it activates the naturally ignored information and leads to a shift in evaluation. Further, we show how manipulating the type of information processing mode (cognitive vs. affective) elicits unique effects within process and outcome simulation on the evaluation of RNPs. The mediating role of performance uncertainty is discussed.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14271/volumes/v36/NA-36

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Mental Simulation and the Evaluation of New Products: The Affective and Cognitive Dimensions of Process- Versus Outcome-Focused Thoughts

Min Zhao, University of Toronto, Canada
Steve Hoeffler, Vanderbilt University, USA
Gal Zauberma, University of Pennsylvania, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Really new products (RNPs) allow consumers to do something they have not been able to do before. In this research we identify a key difference between RNPs and INPs regarding the natural mental representation that is formed when consumers consider the product: a focus on the process of using the product versus a focus on the end benefits provided by the product. More importantly, we proceed to address the question of how process- and outcome-focused visualization can be applied to INP and RNP to enhance evaluations. Further, we explore the efficacy of each type of mental simulation to enhance evaluation under each specific information processing mode (i.e. cognitive and affective) for RNPs.

Natural Mental Representations

According to Hoeffler (2003), consumers have less knowledge and greater performance uncertainty for RNPs than for INPs. Recent work (Wood and Lynch 2001) showed that high prior knowledge leads to learning complacency and lower motivation for information processing. This suggests consumers may not consider all aspects of INPs due to lower motivation, while they may have a higher motivation to learn different aspects of RNPs (i.e. both product benefits and the adoption and usage process). In addition, past research suggests that consumers focus more on the benefits for products with low complexity, but could consider both benefits and learning cost for products with high complexity (Mukherjee and Hoyer 2001). Thus we predict that:

H1: While consumers will focus more attention on the benefits of using a product for INPs, they will focus equally on both aspects when evaluating RNPs.

Process- versus Outcome-Focused Mental Simulation

Research in psychology has identified two distinct types of mental simulation: process simulation that is focused on the process of reaching a goal versus outcome simulation that is focused on the desirable outcome of achieving the goal (Taylor et al. 1998). Multiple studies show that process simulation is more effective than outcome simulation in facilitating goal attainment (e.g., Taylor et al. 1998) or behavioral intentions (Escalas and Luce 2003, 2004). However, recent work in the context of preference over time (Zhao, Hoeffler and Zauberma 2007) has demonstrated that each type of simulation is more effective when it augments the mental representation of an event that is naturally neglected. Based on consumers’ natural focus of INP and RNP, and the complementary role of mental simulation in terms of activating the naturally less accessible considerations, we suggest that:

H2: While process simulation increases evaluations more than outcome simulation for INPs, the effect of process and outcome simulation will not differ for RNPs.

Impact on RNPs: Cognitive vs. Affective Processing Mode

To explore the potential effect of mental simulation on the evaluation of RNP, we reviewed the mental simulation literature and argue that the existing literature in mental simulation has either confounded process and outcome simulation with cognitive and affective components (i.e. process simulation with a cognitive focus vs. outcome simulation with an affective focus (Taylor et al. 1998)), or incorporated both cognitive and affective components into process and outcome simulation (Escalas and Luce 2003, 2004). Our approach here is to tease apart the cognitive and affective processing focus and investigate the unique effect of process and outcome simulation on the evaluation of RNPs under each type of processing. We predict that:

H3: When evaluating RNPs under a cognitive focused processing mode, outcome simulation leads to higher product evaluations than process simulation; whereas the reversal is true under an affective focused mode.

Experiments and Findings

In experiment 1, we asked participants to read a mock ad for an INP (ThinkPad) or a RNP (AudioPC) and indicate how much they thought about the process of using the product and how much they thought about the end benefits of using the product. The results showed that participants naturally made more thoughts about the end benefits than about the process of using the product for INP. However, they indicated similar amount of thoughts about both aspects for RNP. H1 was confirmed.

In experiment 2, we examined the role of classic process and outcome simulation (i.e. combined focus on both the cognitive and affective components) on the evaluation of new products. We asked participants to practice either a process-oriented (i.e. visualizing the steps of using the product) or outcome-oriented (i.e. visualizing the benefits of using the product) mental visualization task after they read the ad. The results showed that for INPs, process simulation indeed led to higher product evaluation because it activated the naturally ignored thoughts regarding the process of using the product. However, for RNPs which naturally evoked thoughts about both the product benefits and the process of using, the effect of process and outcome simulation on product evaluation did not differ. This supported H2.

In study 3, we tested the specific effect of process and outcome simulation on the evaluation of RNP by teasing apart the effect of cognitive vs. affective processing mode. Participants performed either a process-focused or outcome-focused visualization task that emphasized either the cognitive or affective components. The results indicated that under a cognitive processing mode, outcome simulation increased product evaluation more, whereas under an affective mode, process simulation was more effective than the opposite type of simulation. This provided support for H3. In addition, we found a partial mediating role of performance uncertainty on this pattern.

Conclusion

Our research centers on the role of mental representations in new product evaluation. Our findings provide better understanding to this important and complex question by showing the differential effects of process and outcome simulations, and by showing the role of affective and cognitive considerations in the different effective-
ness of these two types of simulations. We further identified performance uncertainty as a mediator. We believe that our research provides some answers to the open questions about new product preference development, and well as open questions about the exact nature of different types of mental simulations and their effectiveness.

REFERENCES


