The Impact of Perceptual Combination Effects on Asymmetry in Co-Branded Products

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Abstract
Previous research has shown that perceptual (visual) and conceptual (textual) information can influence perceptions of (a)symmetry between two concepts that are part of a composite concept. We believe the same logic applies to co-branded products. One brand may be dominant over the other brand. An experiment with young women shows that perceptual cues influence perceptions of asymmetry (rather than conceptual cues). In addition, the perception of asymmetry mediates the effect of perceptual cues on product evaluation.

When two brands with different product portfolios develop a joint product, consumers perceive such a co-branded product as a composite concept. A composite concept is a combination of two categories referred to as a head and a modifier category (Wisniewski 1996, 1997). Park, Jun and Shocker (1996) studied the influence of combining conceptual cues on the consumers’ perception of a co-branded product and found that respondents associated it more with the brand mentioned first (i.e., the header) than the brand mentioned last (i.e., the modifier). Thus, consumers perceive an asymmetry between the brands.

Besides the conceptual cues studied by Park et al. (1996), perceptual cues may also influence perceptions of asymmetry. Gregan-Paxton, Hoeffler, and Zhao (2005) examined how a single perceptual cue (i.e., a cell-phone or a PDA picture) and a single conceptual cue (i.e., a cell-phone or a PDA label) influenced the consumers’ classification of a composite concept (e.g., combination of a PDA and a cell-phone). Their results showed that participants based their categorization on the perceptual cue rather than the conceptual cue.

Although these last results are relevant for the categorization literature, the before mentioned results do not necessarily apply to co-branded products. Gregan-Paxton et al. (2005) have not used any brands in their study, although a brand can form a relevant cue in itself (Boush and Loken 1991). In addition, the perceptual information of Gregan-Paxton et al. (2005) was similar to an existing product without any modification (e.g., it looked like a regular cell-phone). Co-branded products generally do not look exactly similar to an existing product of one brand, but are a modification of that product. This modification is achieved through the addition of design and/or brand elements of the other brand, creating a perceptual header-modifier relationship.

Here we compare the influence of combining perceptual cues to that of combining conceptual cues on perceptions of asymmetry between brands and on consumer evaluations of the co-branded product. For this purpose, we created an advertisement for a new co-branded moisturizing acne-control face-wash. This product combines the attributes of moisturizers (Nivea) and acne-control products (Clearasil) into a single product.

Method
The experiment used a two (combination of perceptual information more similar to Clearasil or Nivea) by two (combination of conceptual information more similar to Clearasil or Nivea) between subjects design. Based on this design we created four different advertisements. The relevant perceptual and conceptual cues were determined through a series of pre-tests. The combination of conceptual cues was similar to that used by Park et al. (1996) (e.g., “Clearasil acne-control face-wash with Nivea moisturizer”). A product designer created the perceptual cues: a thin white tube with blue graphics (more similar to Nivea), and a robust light- and dark blue tube with red graphics (more similar to Clearasil). The logo of the brand more similar to the perceptual information was visually superimposed over the logo of the other brand, imitating the conceptual header-modifier effect.

Our sample existed of 107 women between the age of 14 and 25 years (M=17.9), derived from the target population. Our dependent, perceptions of asymmetry between brands, was measured by three pre-tested items: “which brand does the product belong to more”, “to which brand is the product more related”, and, derived from Park et al. (1996), “which brand is more associated with the product” (7-point scale ranging from ‘mostly Nivea’ to ‘mostly Clearasil’, alpha>0.8). A two item 7-point scale measured product evaluation (Park et al. 1996). Finally, we controlled for familiarity, preference for one of the brands, relevance of ‘moisturizing’ and ‘acne-control’ for the target group, brand relevance during the purchase decision, and attitude toward the package.

Results
Perceptual information influences the perception of asymmetry between the brands (F=78.63, p<.001). The brand that is most similar to the perceptual information dominates. However, conceptual information has no influence on the perception of asymmetry (F<1, NS). Perceptual information also influences product evaluation (F=6.61, p<.02), with the perceptual information similar to Nivea more positively evaluated. Mediation analysis (Baron and Kenny 1986) shows that perception of asymmetry fully mediates the effect of perceptual information on product evaluation. Adding the control variables as covariates does not change these results.

Discussion
Gregan-Paxton et al. (2005) found that perceptual information influences categorization rather than conceptual information. However, they did not examine whether consumers perceive a possible asymmetry between the parts of a composite concept. We did, and we found that only perceptual information influences the perception of asymmetry in a co-branded product. Our findings also add to current co-branding literature, as this literature stream has only focused on the influence of conceptual information on evaluation (Park et al. 1996). We found that the consumers’ perception of asymmetry mediates the effect of perceptual information on product evaluation. Thus, a co-branded product is differently evaluated when a particular brand is dominant through the product’s visual appearance.

Previous categorization studies that investigated the simultaneous use of conceptual and perceptual information examined synthetic non-product stimuli (e.g., drawings with fictitious category labels)(Medin, Wattenmaker, and Hampson 1987; Yamauchi and Markman...