Whence Brand Evaluations? Investigating the Relevance of Personal and Extrapersonal Associations in Brand Attitudes

Sandor Czellar, HEC Paris, France
Benjamin Voyer, HEC Paris, France
Alexandre Schwob, HEC Paris, France
David Luna, Baruch College, USA

A recent conceptualization of the structure of attitudes proposes that people may hold associations that contribute to their personal attitudes about an object (personal associations) but also highly salient associations that do not contribute to their attitudes toward the object (extrapersonal associations; Olson and Fazio 2004). We conducted three studies with brands in the automobile industry to investigate the applicability of this new association typology to consumer attitude domains. Study 1 suggests the presence of extrapersonal associations for all brands investigated, by showing that some highly salient brand associations indeed contribute to brand attitudes but other similarly salient associations do not. Experimental data in Study 2 indicate that an individual difference, consumer expertise with the category, impacts the accessibility of personal associations in a brand evaluation context. Study 3 further strengthens the validity of the new typology by showing that it can meaningfully explain the different types of associations made accessible by persuasive messages. Taken together, our three studies provide strong support for Olson and Fazio’s (2004) framework and highlight its value for a better understanding of the nature of the brand associations that shape consumer brand attitudes.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A recent conceptualization of attitude structure in social psychology proposes that individuals may have in their memories different types of salient associations about an object, each type with a different role in personal attitude formation (Olson and Fazio 2004). According to this conceptualization, some of these salient associations, called personal associations, contribute directly to the formation of personal attitudes about the object. However, other associations, called extrapersonal associations, may be accessible in memory, but because individuals may not necessarily endorse them, these associations do not contribute directly to the formation of personal attitudes about the object. Those extrapersonal associations may be based on a variety of sources, including cultural knowledge, social influence or media information (Karpinski and Hilton 2001).

As this new typology bears potentially important implications for attitude conceptualization and measurement, it has promptly generated considerable research interest. Thus, experiments across several attitude domains highlight the importance of the personal-extrapersonal distinction for a better understanding of the associations affecting the outcomes of different attitude measures (De Houwer, Custers, and De Clercq 2006; Han, Olson, and Fazio 2006; Olson and Fazio 2004). The purpose of the present research is to investigate the validity and boundary conditions of Olson and Fazio’s (2004) framework in a consumer attitude domain—brand evaluations. We present three studies on different car brands that are globally supportive of the new typology.

Study 1 suggests the presence of extrapersonal associations for all brands investigated, by showing that some highly accessible brand associations indeed do contribute to global attitudes about those brands, but others do not. In particular, we found that, for each of the car brands used in the study, at least one of the thoughts among the first five reported by the respondents did not correlate significantly with the overall attitude toward the brand.

Study 2 shows that an individual difference, consumer expertise with the category, impacts the accessibility of personal associations in a brand evaluation context. An important difference with respect to Study 1 is that, instead of using thought protocols, Study 2 assessed the personal-extrapersonal nature of associations with an implicit procedure by implementing the Implicit Association Test. We administered two different versions of the Implicit Association Test (IAT): the traditional IAT (Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz 1998) and the personalized IAT (Olson and Fazio 2004). The traditional IAT, according to Olson and Fazio (2004), is potentially affected by extrapersonal associations that are accessible at the time of categorizing the target object. Olson and Fazio (2004) devised a “personalized” version of the IAT that should be affected by personal associations to a greater extent than the traditional IAT. Our study found that increasing levels of category expertise lead to a greater correspondence of IAT measures with explicit attitude measures in the personalized (but not in the traditional) IAT.

Study 3 further highlights the value of the new typology for consumer research by showing that it can meaningfully explain changes in brand knowledge structures in a persuasion context. As in Study 2, we find that individuals with different levels of expertise use knowledge in different ways when they report their brand evaluations. Further, this study finds that personal associations (those used in the construction of brand evaluations) are made accessible by either strong or weak messages, depending on whether individuals are experts or novices, respectively.

Taken together, our three studies provide strong support for the value of Olson and Fazio’s (2004) framework and provide a better understanding of the nature of the brand associations that form consumer brand attitudes. We conclude the paper with a discussion of the theoretical implications of our results with respect to recent research on the personal-extrapersonal distinction between associations. For instance, our results contribute to our knowledge on attitude structure and provide valuable results for current conceptualizations of attitude processes (Fabrigar, MacDonald, and Wegener 2005). Recently, Gawronski and Bodenhausen (2006, 2007) advanced a distinction between two kinds of evaluative processes: associative and propositional. Associative processes are claimed to provide the basis for primitive affective reactions in evaluative judgments, while propositional processes involve thoughtful assessments of the validity of evaluative statements. Gawronski and Bodenhausen (2006) argue that the personal-extrapersonal distinction is likely to operate at the propositional level but less so at an associative level. Indeed, the explicit attitude measures used in our three studies likely implied some level of propositional reasoning and thus support this view.

However, our second study using different variants of the Implicit Association Test corroborates recent findings in other research (Olson and Fazio 2004; Han et al. 2006) suggesting that the distinction between personal and extrapersonal information may, in some domains at least, also operate at a low-thought, associative level. Our findings suggest that attitudes for long-standing, established brands are likely to be part of such domains. However, the new typology may not apply to, for example, freshly formed attitudes toward new brands. Further research is certainly warranted to investigate which consumption domains are more or less likely to entail the relevance of the personal-extrapersonal distinction at both associative and propositional levels.

REFERENCES


