The Role of Affect, Music and Self-Awareness in Consumer Information Processing

Iris Hung, National University of Singapore, Singapore
Robert S. Wyer, Jr., Hong Kong University of Science & Technology, China

People’s tendency to base their product evaluations on subjective reactions may depend on their sensitivity to these reactions. Experimental manipulations of self-awareness increased participants’ tendency to imagine using the products in a situational context activated by music, and consequently increased evaluations of products that were typically used in the situational context called to mind by the music.

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Study 2 replicated and extended Study 1 by demonstrating that high death accessibility combined with high essentialism leads to more negative reactions toward brand essentialism, and the magnitude of this effect is influenced by how much the brands in question represent cultural values. Participants first completed an implicit measure of death-thought accessibility. The measure was designed as a word-completion task and included word fragments that can be completed in either death-related or unrelated ways (e.g., G R A _ _ E can be completed as “grave” or “grape”). After this measure of death accessibility, participants rated on a seven-point scale how much they believed certain brands/cultural icons (e.g., Crest, Tom Hanks) represented American values. This was followed by brand extension scenarios involving the brands participants were just asked about. These scenarios were: (a) Crest coming up with a lip moisturizer, (b) Lipton introducing “Lipton Soup,” (c) Tom Hanks recording a rock album, and (d) Some producers filming a sequel to the movie Casablanca. After each scenario, participants answered the same questions about their reaction toward these extensions as in Study 1.

Our results revealed a significant Death Accessibility x Essentialism interaction as a predictor of negative reactions toward brand extensions, across four different scenarios. Furthermore, we found a Death Accessibility x Essentialism x Value representativeness interaction, which confirmed our hypothesis that a combination of high death anxiety and essentialism leads to particularly antagonistic responses toward brand extensions when the brands are highly representative of cultural values.

These two studies, taken together, suggest that a brand extension can be interpreted as threatening and perceived negatively, if the brand is highly representative of the culture’s values, and if the consumer is high in essentialism and death-thought accessibility. It seems that individuals embrace iconic brands as instances of their cultural worldview, and the desire to hold on to them, in their “pure form”, is more pronounced for people who are experiencing a combination of high essentialism and death anxiety.

References

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Although consumers’ evaluations of a product are obviously based in part on the favorableness of their attributes, at least two other factors can come into play. First, consumers may base their evaluations of a product on their positive or negative affective reactions to it. Second, they might imagine using the product in a particular situation and base their judgments on the desirability of doing so. Both effects depend on people’s use of their subjective reactions as a basis for judgment. A contingency in the effects, therefore, may be the extent to which individuals are likely to consult these reactions for use as a basis for judgment rather than relying on more objective criteria. The present research examined this possibility.

Theoretical Background
Affect as information. People’s tendency to use the affect they are experiencing and attribute to an object as a basis for judging this object is well established (Schwarz & Clore 1996). In the product domain, however, there are two qualifications. First, people are only likely to base their judgments of a product on their feelings if the product is normally based on hedonic criteria rather than utilitarian considerations (Pham 1998; Yeung & Wyer 2004, 2005). Second, the affect consumers are experiencing may influence their judgments only if these feelings are salient to them at the time and, therefore, are a prominent source of information.

Contextual influences on product judgments. Consumers who are called upon to evaluate a product may often imagine themselves using the product in a particular situation and base their judgments on the feeling they anticipate to result from doing so. To this extent, their evaluation may depend in part on the particular situation they happen to consider, and this, in turn, may be influenced by features of the situational context in which the evaluation is made. For example, people who are asked to evaluate products while listening to music may imagine themselves using the products in a situation similar to that in which this music is often encountered, and may base their judgments on their feelings about doing so.

Effects of self-awareness. Note that people’s use of the affective reactions as an informational basis for judgments, and the thoughts and feelings that result from imagining the use of the product in a given situational context, both require consultation of their subjective emotional or cognitive responses. To this extent, it may depend on their general sensitivity to these responses. This sensitivity may be influenced by their self-awareness, or the attention they pay to themselves as an object (Duval & Wicklund 1973). According to Scheier and Carver (1977), increasing people’s consciousness of their internal feelings should increase their use of their feelings as a basis for judgment. In the present context, this could have two effects. First, if products spontaneously elicit positive or negative affect, self-awareness may increase the tendency to use this affect as a basis for evaluating these products. Second, self-awareness may increase the tendency to imagine oneself using the product in a particular situation and to base evaluations of the product on the desirability of doing so. Thus, if listening to music activates thoughts and feelings about a situation in which this type of music is normally played, self-awareness might increase evaluations of products that are typically used in this situation. Evaluations of products that are not typically