The Effect of Experiential Analogies on Consumer Perceptions and Attitudes

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By comparing a product (e.g., a sports car) to a disparate experience (e.g., a first kiss), an analogy has the power to shift focus from objective information, such as product functionality and performance, to the evaluative, emotional and multi-sensory information associated with the product experience. This shift from objective product knowledge to subjective experience enables the identification of base preference (i.e., a consumer’s liking for the comparison experience) as an important moderator of analogical persuasiveness. Additionally, the emotional knowledge transfer perspective utilized in this research contributes to understanding the role of emotional knowledge and experienced emotion in analogical thinking.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Microsoft has compared playing the Xbox 360 to participating in a city-wide water balloon fight and Alfa Romeo has compared driving a sports car to a first kiss. These are prime examples of experiential analogies. By comparing a product to a familiar but disparate experience, these analogical comparisons have the power to shift consumer focus from objective information, such as functionality and performance, to the evaluative, emotional and multisensory information associated with the product experience. This shift in focus highlights the importance of base preference (i.e., a consumer’s liking for the comparison experience) as an important influence on analogical persuasiveness. This shift in focus also highlights the power of an analogy to tap into the emotional knowledge that individuals have gained from their own experiences. Surprisingly, previous research has focused almost exclusively on analogies designed to transfer objective knowledge in the context of strategic and functional oriented comparisons (Gregan-Paxton 2001; Gregan-Paxton and Moreau 2003; Hoefflter 2003; Roehm and Sternthal 2001). In doing so, not only has the consumer’s ability to transfer unique, personally-experienced emotional information been ignored, but the effect of prior preferences on an analogy’s persuasiveness has not been investigated. Addressing these gaps and building on previous speculation on the role of emotions in analogical thinking (Thagard and Shelley 2001), our research defines and isolates the effects of base preference, emotional knowledge, and experienced emotion on consumer attitudes.

When processing an experiential analogy, it is anticipated that consumers will access their knowledge of the base experience and any knowledge they might have of the target product experience. With the Alfa Romeo Spider ad, individuals would think about what happened and the emotions experienced during a first kiss. Any similarities between what takes place during a first kiss and what an individual knows or thinks driving the sports car might entail would be cognitively identified. Finally, based on these identified similarities, emotional inferences (i.e., predictions about the emotions that would be experienced during target product use) would be generated. We predict that whether or not the generation of emotional inferences will have a positive or negative effect on target attitudes will depend on the favorability of the base preference (i.e., how much the base experience is liked). This moderating hypothesis implies that target attitudes will be more positive when preference for the base experience is favorable and a high number of emotional inferences are generated. When preference for the base experience is less favorable and a high number of emotional inferences are generated, we would expect target attitudes to be more negative. Note that the current investigation focuses on the more common use of experiential analogies to positively influence consumer attitudes.

Three studies were designed to test our theorizing. This was done using three different analogies across several base and target categories, thus contributing to the generalizability of our effects. Across all three studies, we also compared the persuasiveness of an experiential analogy to more general emotion-oriented appeals. This provided us with additional insight on the contributors to analogical persuasiveness and the ability to make substantive recommendations for whom experiential analogies may be more persuasive.

Study 1 involved direct measures of base preference and emotional inferences to test the main moderating prediction. Participants were randomly assigned to view either an experiential analogy ad or an emotional appeal control ad. The findings were consistent with expectations and suggest that experiential analogies cue the transfer of emotional knowledge from the base experience to the target product. The effect of emotional inferences on target attitudes was moderated by base preference. The more participants liked the base experience and the more emotional inferences they generated then the more favorable were consumer attitudes. The analogy ad was also liked significantly more than the emotional appeal ad.

Study 2 was designed to provide additional evidence for the main moderating prediction and for the cognitive nature of the emotional knowledge transfer process. This was done by manipulating participants’ ability to generate emotional inferences through cognitive load. Measures of experienced emotion were included in this study and in study 3 to further show that emotional knowledge transfer is cognitive and has an effect on product attitudes independent from experienced emotion. In study 3, the soundness construct (which captures the extent to which the base and target share deeper underlying similarities) was introduced to further demonstrate that base preference moderates the effect of emotional knowledge transfer on target attitudes. Across studies 2 and 3, we found evidence that the processing of experiential analogies results in the generation of emotional reactions which also predict consumer attitudes. Importantly, accounting for experienced emotion did not reduce the significant effect of base preference and emotional inferences on consumer attitudes. This suggests that experienced emotion and emotional knowledge transfer, a more cognitive process, may be viewed as having complementary effects on the persuasiveness of an experiential analogy.

The contribution of this research is three-fold. First, analogy researchers have highlighted the need to move beyond the identification of factors that affect analogy comprehension to identify the factors that affect an analogy’s persuasiveness (Perrott, Gentner, and Bodenhausen 2005). Addressing this, we establish base preference as an important influence on an analogy’s persuasiveness. This research is the first to examine how preference for a disparate base is integrated into a target product evaluation. Second, we demonstrate that product attitudes can be significantly influenced by directing people to consider their own subjective experience as a basis for understanding the emotions that may be experienced when using a new product. We find evidence that this involves the cognitive consideration of emotions, which we have labeled emotional knowledge transfer. This is perhaps surprising and of central interest to marketing practitioners, since we show that the persuasiveness of an experiential analogy is not limited to emotional reactions. Finally, on a broader level, our research provides the first known empirical investigation of analogies involving experiential comparisons, thus establishing their value in persuasion.

REFERENCES


