When Biasing Cues Improve Vs. Bias Quality Judgments

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Consumers correctly learn to avoid low quality products that are priced high. Yet, they refrain from abandoning the idea that high price is a strong positive indicator in the category. A series of three studies suggests that consumers may use different processes to judge the quality of products they have versus have not tried before.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Recent research demonstrates that quality judgments made at the time of repeat purchase can be more accurate, as opposed to less, when those quality judgments had been biased at the time of trial (e.g. when the price is high but quality low), compared to when quality judgments had never been biased (Vanhouche and van Osselaer 2009). This phenomenon was dubbed “the accuracy-enhancing effect of biasing cues” and could easily be taken as evidence for consumers’ updating of pre-existing price-quality beliefs. Such an interpretation might seem reasonable given some specific task characteristics in the paradigm used by Vanhouche and van Osselaer—e.g. the easiness of the rules to be learned and the non-ambiguous quality feedback—but would be at odds with most of the literature which documents scant rule updating (Pechmann and Ratneshwar 1992; Broniarczyk and Alba 1994; Lichtenstein and Burton 1989).

The current research replicates the accuracy-enhancing effect of biasing cues (Study 1) and uncovers the mechanism behind it (Study 2). Even though rule updating seemed to have been possible or even likely, the results indicate that consumers use the initially biasing cue as an extra powerful memory cue to retrieve the quality level of individual previously experienced price-quality points. In other words, the accuracy-enhancing effect of biasing cues is driven by an exemplar based process rather than a rule based process. In addition, the pre-existing price-quality belief had remained unchanged. It was not updated.

As a result, quality judgments of not previously experienced products remained biased (Study 3) even though participants could have learned that, “at least in this particular context”, price did not positively predict quality. In other words, the accuracy-enhancing effect does not generalize easily to situations in which the prices and brands at time of repeat purchase are different than during trial, indicating that pre-existing price-quality beliefs remain powerful and influential.

The broader implication may be that consumers use different processes to judge the quality of products they have versus have not tried before. The exemplar-based process helps them to quickly learn to avoid specific products they had a bad experience with. The rule-based process is updated much more conservatively and seems hardly affected by a few rule-inconsistent experiences. This conservativeness may be highly functional by providing stability in quality judgment (McClelland, McNaughton, and O’Reilly 1995), but may also represent a dysfunctional failure to learn from experience, as if rule-inconsistent experiences are picked up by the exemplar-based system (and used to correctly evaluate the specific, previously-experienced, rule-inconsistent products in the future) but are totally ignored by the rule-based process. In that case, Brehmer’s (1980) conclusion about learning, “in one word: not from experience,” may indeed apply. But it only applies to rules and judgments about products we have not tried before. Luckily, consumers also have an exemplar-based process that very effectively helps them to avoid the berries that made them sick when they tasted them, or that high-priced orange juice that tasted like vinegar.

REFERENCES