The “Left-To-Right Effect” of Product Location on Consumer Judgment

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We examine how horizontal product positions influence consumers’ product judgments. We find that consumers expect to see lower-quality products on the left and higher-quality products on the right. Also, when product locations are consistent with their expectations, consumers experience the sense of feeling right and become confident in their judgments.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Previous research indicates that people implicitly associate horizontal space with temporal concepts of past and future (Ouellet et al. 2010; Santiago et al. 2007; Tversky et al. 1991). For instance, Santiago et al. (2007) proposed that people project the past to left space and the future to right space. Supporting this proposition, they found that judgments were facilitated when past words were responded to with the left hand, and future words with the right hand. Cross-cultural studies (e.g., Ouellet et al. 2010; Tversky et al. 1991) have further demonstrated that a writing system influences the temporal concepts and horizontal space association. Ouellet et al. (2010) found faster responses to past words with the left hand and future words with the right hand for Spanish participants, those who were exposed to a left-to-right writing system, but not for Hebrew participants, who were exposed to a right-to-left writing system. This finding indicates that people who are exposed to a left-to-right writing system tend to associate past with the left and future with the right (Ouellet et al. 2010; Tversky et al. 1991).

Based on this previous research, we expect that consumers will associate horizontal space with properties of the products. In general, newer products are more advanced and of higher quality than products that are introduced to the market earlier. Because of this association between time and the quality of products, consumers will assume that more advanced products are located on the right side of less advanced alternatives. More importantly, when products are displayed in a congruent way with their beliefs (less advanced, lower-quality products are positioned on the left and more advanced, higher-quality products are on the right), we predict that consumers will feel fluent to process product information and evaluate products.

Research on metacognitive experiences has suggested that metacognitive experiences influence consumer judgment in multiple ways (Alter and Oppenheimer 2009; Novemsky et al. 2007). Research showed that when a target was processed fluently, people tended to associate such a feeling with liking and preference (Reber, Winkielman, and Schwartz 1998; Winkielman et al. 2003). Studies on regulatory focus have shown that fit between people’s processing strategy and their regulatory focus stimulates the experience of feeling right, which in turn enhances people’s confidence in and reliance on their cognitive responses (Aaker and Lee 2006; Avnet and Higgins 2006; Cesario, Grant, and Higgins 2004; Schwarz 2006). Extending this previous research, we propose that product location will lead consumers to feel more or less fluent to process information and in turn influence consumers’ confidence in product judgments.

In Study 1, we used a computerized shopping task. In this study, participants were asked to purchase products and evaluate their clients of ideal product positions to help them maximize sales of their brands. After reviewing three possible positions and three products, participants selected the ideal position of each of the products. Results revealed that participants were most likely to locate the least advanced product, with the lowest functionality level, on the left and the most advanced product, with the highest functionality level, on the right (55.2%). A t-test showed that the frequency of the left-to-right order was significantly higher than the second most frequent order (16.4%; t(115) = 8.361, p = .000).

In Study 2, we varied the product type in a benign domain with low levels of negative affect and compared participants’ product evaluations under different product location conditions. We found that in the left-to-right condition, participants felt right while evaluating products to a greater extent than those in the right-to-left condition. This difference was significant (Mright-to-left = 7.065, Mleft-to-right = 6.432, t(88) = 2.103, p = .038). Last, a bootstrap analysis confirmed that feeling right mediated the impact of product locations on confidence, 95% bootstrapped confidence interval = [-1.2664, -0.892] (Preacher and Hayes 2004).

Recently, there has been a growing attention to Sensory Marketing, which acknowledges how people are affected by their senses to make judgments or decisions (Krishna 2012). However, only limited research has examined the impact of visual locations of products on consumers’ judgments (but see Deng and Kahn 2009; Valenzuela, Raghubir, and Mitakakis 2013). This study advances this area of research by investigating how horizontal product positions influence consumers’ metacognitive experiences and product judgments. In addition to theoretical contributions, the present research offers implications for marketers. Our findings suggest product managers should place lower-quality, less advanced products on the left and higher-quality, more advanced products on the right as this product display fits consumers’ beliefs.

REFERENCES


