How Experience Similarity Shapes Product Evaluation

Aner Sela, University of Florida, USA
Jordan Etkin, Duke University, USA

Consumers often have multiple experiences with the same product, yet little is known about how the similarity of experiences might impact product evaluation. Six studies demonstrate that recalling more similar product experiences makes consumers think they use the product more, and consequently evaluate it more positively.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1017460/volumes/v42/NA-42

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
How Experience Similarity Shapes Product Evaluation
Jordan Etkin, Duke University, USA
Aner Sela, University of Florida, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers often have multiple experiences with the same product. An iPod provides musical accompaniment while walking the dog, flying on airplanes, and running on treadmills. A pair of sunglasses offers eye protection while running errands, commuting to work, and lounging at the beach. A handbag can be carried to the movies, the office, and the mall. Might the similarity of experiences consumers have with a product affect how much they like it? If someone recently bought an iPod, for example, would having relatively different experiences (e.g., walking the dog, flying on airplanes, and running on treadmills) or more similar experiences (e.g., walking the dog, walking to work, and walking to the grocery) with it make them evaluate it more positively?

Contrary to decades of research on consumers’ need for variety and stimulation, we propose that perceiving product experiences as more similar – not more different – improves product evaluation. We argue that more similar experiences are categorized more broadly (Ülkümen, Chakravarti, and Morwitz 2010) and as a result, appear to occur more frequently (Redden 2008; Redden and Hoch 2009; Sussman and Alter 2012). Because usage frequency is key driver of product evaluation, we thus predict that perceiving product experiences as more (vs. less) similar will enhance product evaluation.

Four studies support this perspective. Study 1 (N=128) examines how having more or less similar product experiences impact product evaluation. We manipulated perceived experience similarity, holding the experiences constant, and measured the effect on product liking. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: similar versus different experiences. First, participants described a recent purchase and three experiences they had had with it. Second, after listing these experiences, we manipulated how similar those experiences seemed. In the similar [different] condition, participants described how their experiences were similar to [different from] one another. To measure product evaluation, participants rated on seven-point scales how much they liked their purchase and how happy it made them (r=.76). We collected additional measures to rule out a potential alternative explanation due to differences in experience valence across conditions. Participants viewed each of the three experiences they had previously listed and rated how positive it was.

Results suggest that, compared to describing differences among their experiences with a recent purchase (5.76), describing similarities among those experiences enhanced participants’ evaluation of the product (6.18). There were no differences in experience valence, either within or between conditions. Further, a follow-up study ruled out the possibility that this effect was driven by differences in feelings of cognitive ease across conditions (Schwarz 2004).

Study 2 tested our proposed process by (1) directly measuring perceived usage frequency and testing its mediating role in the effect, and (2) manipulating how broadly participants categorize their product experiences. If focusing on experience similarity impacts perceived usage frequency by promoting broader categorization of experiences, then encouraging Participants (N = 110) described a recent purchase and three experiences they had previously had with it. In the similar experiences condition, they were asked to describe experiences that were relatively similar. In the different experiences condition, they were asked to describe experiences that were relatively different. At this point participants were told the study was completed and thanked. Next, participants completed an ostensibly unrelated categorization task which primed narrow vs. neutral categorization (adapted from Liberman, Sagristano, and Trope 2002). Finally, we asked participants to think back to the recent purchase they had previously described, and to indicate how much they liked it, how happy it made them, and how much they anticipated enjoying it in the future (α=.86). We also measured perceived usage frequency.

Results replicated study 1 in the neutral categorization condition: Compared to participants who listed different product experiences (5.55), those who listed similar experiences liked the product more (6.24). In the narrow categorization condition, however, there was no significant difference in product evaluation (5.85 vs. 6.26). A moderated mediation analysis indicated that the positive effect of more (vs. less) similar experiences on product liking was driven by increased usage frequency perceptions. This indirect effect was not significant, however, in the narrow categorization condition.

Study 3 examines the generalizability of our effects by examining whether active elaboration on (dis)similarities is necessary to obtain the observed effects, or if – consistent with our categorization account – simple similarity cues might suffice. Participants (N=106) read a vignette about a fellow student, Susan, who had recently bought a handbag. They were told that Susan had the following three experiences with her handbag: “running errands,” “picking up her kids from school,” “driving to a meeting.” We manipulated how similar these three experiences by labeling them as similar vs. “different” (Etkin and Ratner 2013). Finally, we measured product evaluation and perceived usage frequency. As predicted, framing product experiences as more similar increased how much participants thought another person would like her recent purchase (6.23 vs. 5.70). This effect was mediated by assessments of how frequently the product would be used.

Our studies so far used controlled experiments to demonstrate the causal effect of experience similarity on perceived usage frequency and product evaluation. Study 4 investigates whether these relationships emerge naturally, when consumers reflect on past purchases in the absence of experimental interventions. Participants (N=68) described a recent purchase. We measured how much they liked the purchase, how similar their past experiences with it had been, and how many times a week they used it. As expected, the more participants thought their product experiences were similar, the more they liked what they bought. Further, this relationship was mediated by perceived usage frequency.

Our findings make two important theoretical contributions. First, whereas prior work on variety-seeking suggests that product variety often improves consumers’ experiences (Ratner, Kahn, and Kahneman 1999), we demonstrate an important exception to this principle. Second, we illustrate a novel factor that shapes consumers’ frequency judgments: the similarity of past experiences.

REFERENCES
