Value of Weighty Products: the Influence of Haptic Weight on Product Evaluations

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People perceive a heavy product to be more valuable than a light one even when the weight is not diagnostic or relevant to the evaluation. This is because experiencing a product’s relative heaviness activates positive affective reaction toward the product which subsequently enhances its perceived value.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

People often hold or touch products before purchasing them. By holding the product in their hand, consumers gain the ability to evaluate the product’s weight and other haptic information (e.g., texture, hardness, temperature). For some products (e.g., laptop or groceries), weight is a critical aspect that provides diagnostic information and it might be positively (e.g., groceries) or negatively (e.g., laptop) correlated with the product value. However, weight is not critical or diagnostic for some other products (e.g., DVDs), though consumers still register weight information when handling these products. From a standard economic or rational perspective, haptic experience of weight should not have any impact on the product’s value for products whose weight provides neither positive nor negative diagnostic information. However, in this research, we posit the opposite showing that people perceive a product with a higher relative weight as more valuable and they are willing to pay more for a heavier product even though the weight is not a diagnostic attribute.

Past research has shown that experiencing physical weight unrelated to a target of judgment activates cognitive concepts metaphorically related to weight and subsequently changes people’s judged importance of unconnected issues (Jostmann, Lakens, and Schubert 2009; Zhang and Li 2012). This research moves away from cognitive activation and interpretation of weight and looks at the affective interpretation of a target product’s weight, albeit non-diagnostic, and how it influences perceived value of that same target product.

Importantly, haptic sensory input can also lead to affective interpretations. Peck and Wiggins (2006) have examined affective interpretations of the texture dimension of touch and shown that marketing messages incorporating a touch element with positive sensory feedback (e.g., having a soft texture) enhance affective response and are more persuasive for people with autotelic need for touch. However, research has not looked at affective interpretations of weight in a product evaluation context.

Practical insight suggests that weight and heaviness lead to positive interpretations of products. Bang & Olufsen, a Danish electronics manufacturer, often make their products (from remote controls to sound systems) relatively heavy to create a perception of quality in their consumers’ mind (Lindstrom 2005). Moreover, companies print brochures and catalogs for luxury or expensive products on heavy papers to express their distinct identity and create a stronger touch experience for their customers (Hultén, Broweus, and Dijk 2009). Therefore, we expect that in a product evaluation context where people hold the product with their hand, holding a heavy product lead to a positive affective reaction. Furthermore, the word “heavy” often describes an excessive amount, a more potent, or a more powerful object, such as in heavy clouds, heavy machinery, heavy traffic, heavy taxes, a heavy schedule, and heavy rain. Since people show a preference toward excessive sizes of objects (Silvera, Josephs, and Giesler 2002), we expect that semantic interpretations of heaviness (i.e., an excessive amount, a more potent, or a more powerful product) also lead to positive affective reactions toward the product. Thus, we hypothesize that holding a heavy product triggers positive affective reaction toward the product.

In a product evaluation context, consumers often make judgments by asking themselves how they feel about a given product and they use the experienced feeling to form their overall evaluation of the product (Pham 1998; Pham et al. 2001). Relying on predictions of the affect-as-information account and affective interpretations of product heaviness, we hypothesize that consumers evaluate heavier products more positively and would be willing to pay more for the product, even when weight of that product provides irrelevant or non-diagnostic information.

We examined the effect of nondiagnostic weight on product evaluation and our proposed underlying mechanism across four experiments using different products. In Study 1a, we show that people are willing to pay more for a heavier package of earbuds. In Study 1b, we used point-of-purchase cardboard displays as the product. Point-of-purchase displays are frequently used to sell services, gift cards, tickets, season passes, or other products through retailers such as Costco. The point-of-purchase display we used showed a deal for playing bowling at a local bowling alley. Customers often hold the cardboard in their hand to read the details. Therefore, they receive haptic information of the cardboard display. Results show that people are willing more for the same bowling deal if they hold the heavier cardboard display.

In Study 2, we again used earbuds as the product and measured both people’s affective reaction toward the product and their willingness to pay for it. Results show people have more positive affective reactions toward the heavier earbuds package and are willing to pay more for it. A mediation analysis also shows that people’s positive affective reaction toward the product mediates the effect of weight on willingness to pay.

Past research has shown that whether people use their general positive or negative feelings induced by unrelated factors in their judgment depends on how much they feel they are entitled to judge (Croizet and Fiske, 2000). Thus, we expect variations in entitlement to judge a product moderates the effect of weight on product evaluation. In Study 3, we tested this prediction by manipulating people’s sense of entitlement to evaluate the target product. In this study we used the same product as Study 1b: cardboard displays showing a bowling deal. To manipulate a sense of entitlement to evaluate the product, we first asked participants to complete a test about their expertise in bowling game. Next, they were provided with a heavy or light board to evaluate. Results show that the effect of weight on perceived value was attenuated when participants received the feedback of not having expertise. In other words, people rely on the positive feelings induced by the heavy board to evaluate the bowling deal only when they thought they were expert in bowling game, thus, they were entitled to evaluate it.

REFERENCES


