Appreciation of Creativity: Unintended Consequences of Thematic Versus Taxonomic Product Organization

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Three experiments reveal that thematic versus taxonomic product assortments can evoke a relational processing mind-set, which carries over and later enhances consumers’ evaluations and willingness-to-pay for creative goods. However, this effect emerged only among participants possessing a chronic interdependent (versus independent) self-construal, who are more inclined to process information relationally.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Retailers can organize their products either taxonomically or thematically. Taxonomic product assortment involves organizing broad classes of products hierarchically into increasingly more specific categories, where members in each product category share many features and frequently serve as substitutes for one another. For example, the category of socks may consist of various low cut, ankle, and knee-high socks. In contrast, products are thematically organized if they perform complementary roles in a consumption situation (Estes et al. 2012). To illustrate, although socks, an MP3 player, and deodorant share few, if any, common features, they are thematically related because they are commonly used together during workouts.

These two types of product assortments are perceived by consumers differently (Diehl, van Herpen, and Lamberton 2015). Taxonomic assortments help consumers efficiently locate and compare substitute products that interest them, potentially enhancing their satisfaction with the purchase process and the goods they buy, whereas thematic assortments increase exposure to complementary products that may otherwise be overlooked by consumers. Studies that have compared the two types of assortment have found that thematic product assortments are perceived as more attractive, but also more effortful to process (Diehl, et al. 2014). Still, to date, little is known about how taxonomic and thematic product assortments influence the processing of consumers who examine them and any downstream effects such processing may have on their responses to goods observed in unrelated contexts.

We reasoned that the related versus compartmentalized nature of products displayed in thematic versus taxonomic product assortments may induce consumers who examine them to adopt a relational versus an item-specific processing mindset. Moreover, extant research has established that each of these types of mind-sets can persist and carry-over, potentially producing downstream effects on consumers’ perceptions and/or behavior when they later encounter products in unrelated contexts (Kim and Meyers-Levy 2008). Pertinent to this, substantial evidence suggests that relational processing, which entails encoding connections among often distally related concepts, boosts not only creativity but appreciation of it (Runco 1991; Yang et al. 2011). Thus, we propose that consumers who examine thematic (versus taxonomic) product assortments will elicit a relational processing mindset that produces downstream enhancement in these consumers’ appreciation of innovative, novel, or otherwise creative goods, which typically carry higher profit margins.

Nevertheless, certain individual differences may modify whether such downstream effects occur in later contexts. Research on self-construal has distinguished individuals with an interdependent orientation, who define themselves more holistically in terms of their relationships with others, from individuals possessing an independent orientation, who define themselves more analytically by focusing on their internal attributes such as traits or abilities (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Further and importantly, Zhu and Meyers-Levy (2009) established that these alternative ways of thinking about the self more generally shape cognition, such that interdependents seem to gravitate toward relational processing that emphasizes connections and holism, whereas independents favor item-specific processing, characterized by analytic context-independent thinking whereby individual items are set contrastively against others.

Upon integrating these observations, we propose the following. Because interdependents (but not independents) are chronically inclined and possibly more adept at processing data relationally, the impact of thematic product assortments on a consumer’s relational processing mindset and its downstream effect on appreciation of creative goods may be more likely to occur when individuals possess an interdependent than an independent self-construal.

We conducted three experiments where in each, we manipulated whether individuals examined several thematic or taxonomic product assortments. Subsequently we investigated the downstream effect this exerted on individuals’ appreciation of creative ads or products encountered later in an unrelated context. Experiment 1 found that participants who previously examined several thematic versus taxonomic product assortments exhibited both greater appreciation of creative ads and they better understood them.

Experiment 2 extended on this by examining the anticipated moderating effect of self-construal, and instead of examining creative ads, study 2 investigated the downstream effect of the alternative product assortments on individuals’ willingness-to-pay (WTP) for both creative and conventional products. Consistent with expectations, treatment effects emerged only on individuals’ WTP for creative products, not conventional ones. Further, individuals with an interdependent self-construal reported higher WTP for creative products when they had previously examined the thematic, not the taxonomic product assortments. However, individuals with an independent self-construal reported equivalent WTP sums regardless of the products assortments they had examined earlier.

Finally, experiment 3 investigated whether a mediated moderation effect of relational processing (mediator) and self-construal (moderator) can explain how product assortment influences consumers’ appreciation of creative products. The procedure and treatments used in this study were the same as those of experiment 2 except that only creative products were included, WTP was replaced by product evaluations, and an indicator was added to gauge individuals’ use of relational processing by asking them to solve 10 Remote Associates Test (RAT, Mednick 1962) problems. Because successful performance on RAT problems requires engaging iteratively in relational processing (Kray, Galinsky, and Wong 2006) participants’ relational processing was gauged by their number of correctly solved RAT problems. As anticipated, results revealed parallel interactive effects of product assortment and self-construal on both individuals’ evaluations of the creative products and on the indicator of their relational processing. In addition, bootstrap analysis indicated that among interdependent individuals, the effect of product assortment was mediated by relational processing. However, this was not the case among independent individuals.

In sum, this research contributes to the literature on both mind-sets and product assortments by demonstrating that examination of thematic (but not taxonomic) product assortments can trigger a relational processing mindset, and particularly among individuals possessing an interdependent self-construal, this mindset carries over and boosts appreciation of creative products and ads encountered later in unrelated contexts. The current research also has important
practical implications. It suggests that retailers can use thematic product assortments to increase consumers’ appreciation and possible purchase of frequently highly profitable innovative, novel, or otherwise creative products that may be featured elsewhere in the retail venue.

REFERENCES


