Form, Function, and Fluency: Surprising Effects of Product Presentation (Dis)Fluency on Attribute Evaluations

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Metacognitive fluency stemming from product presentation affects evaluations. Contrary to prior theorizing (e.g., contrast effects), sequential presentation of heterogeneous products (e.g., utilitarian and hedonic products) attenuates attribute evaluations via disfluency whereas sequential presentation of homogeneous products (e.g., all utilitarian v. all hedonic products) yields more extreme evaluations via fluency.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1024990/volumes/v45/NA-45

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Relative comparison suggests that presenting very different (v. very similar) items sequentially should accentuate the stark differences among the items such that a hedonic, pleasurable item should seem much more pleasurable following the presentation of a functional, utilitarian item as opposed to following the presentation of a hedonic item.

Indeed, previous research, such as the two-factor model on assimilation and contrast (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1993) would suggest that stimuli that have little overlap should produce contrast effects granted plenty of cognitive resources are available. Otherwise, assimilation is predicted. Other research exploring the juxtaposition of two or more products in a market share similar effects of dominance (Huber, Payne, and Puto 1982), contrasted preferences, and even surprising consequence on choice (Wilcoxon et al. 2009).

However, the prior research focused primarily on the rational, logical considerations of product comparisons and less, if at all, on the metacognitive experience of fluency that can arise from observing products in choice contexts. In the current research, we propose that the presentation of heterogeneous or homogeneous sets of products can affect an individual’s metacognitive experience of fluency and, in turn, affect the individual’s evaluation of a product. More specifically, we propose that the presentation of heterogeneous products in a given set will be experienced as fluent and, as such, result in more heuristic, extreme evaluations. The presentation of heterogeneous products (i.e., varying on even just one dimension) in a given set will be experienced as disfluent and, as such, result in more deliberative, conservative evaluations, thereby attenuating the evaluations of the products.

To test our theory, we conducted three studies using products selected from the famous SkyMall magazine each pretested to be either utilitarian or hedonic. In study 1 (n = 122), utilitarian products presented with other utilitarian products (i.e., fluent) were rated as significantly more useful/functional than when they were presented with hedonic products (i.e., disfluent). In study 2 (n = 125), hedonic products presented with other hedonic products (i.e., fluent) were rated as significantly more fun/funny than when they were presented with utilitarian products (i.e., disfluent). These findings are contrary to what the two-factor theory would predict regarding stimuli, overlap, and the likelihood for contrast or assimilation. In study 3 (n = 118), we use products within the same product category (i.e., shirts) to rule out the possibility that effects in the first two studies were due to product variation as opposed to the varying utilitarian/hedonic attributes of the products. Study 3 replicated the findings of the prior studies by showing that utilitarian shirts (i.e., dress shirts) are perceived to be more useful/functional when presented in a series with other utilitarian shirts, hedonic shirts (e.g., a Hawaiian shirt) are perceived to be more fun/funny when presented in a series with other hedonic shirts, and the heterogeneous presentation of shirts mitigates their usefulness/functionality (for utilitarian shirts) and their fun/funniness (for hedonic shirts).

With respect to theory, the studies contribute to the prior research on contrast effects, the two-factor model on assimilation and contrast, and other, more rational approaches to understanding comparisons between stimuli by adding a metacognitive, “feelings as information” perspective to the literature. Although rationally the presentation of two very different products should highlight their differences and result in more extreme evaluations, particularly on the dimension on which the stimuli differ, the metacognitive experiences of fluency and disfluency that arise from homogeneous and heterogeneous product presentation yield more extreme and more conservative evaluations, respectively. Thus, prior rational theorizing that suggests heterogeneous presentation should lead to greater contrast in evaluations does not explain the muted findings found within the heterogeneous presentation evaluations herein. More work can be done to explore the relationship between the prior research and the current findings, specifically with respect to when consumers are more likely to rely on rationality versus their metacognitive experience.

With respect to practice, the presentation of product options and varieties has been an important cornerstone of marketing communications for decades but plays an even more important role in online markets where customers can scroll through hundreds to thousands of products on a website. Whether it makes sense to feature similar products or different products in sequences may depend on the marketing objective of a company, as there may be instances in which differences should be highlighted (e.g., comparing with a competitor’s products) or minimized (e.g., offering alternatives for an out-of-stock option). Equally important, understanding the mindset of consumers matters, as customers engaging in more rational, deliberative decision making may exhibit contrast and assimilation effects consistent with the prior literature whereas other customers engaging in less rational processing may be more likely to rely on the metacognitive experiences shown here.

REFERENCES