How Goals Affect the Impact of Product Attributes on Product Evaluation: the Role of Attribute Ability, Goal Activation and Goal-Product Fit

Na Xiao, Queen’s University, Canada
Laurence Ashworth, Queen’s University, Canada

Much research examines the way in which consumers combine or compare product attribute information when evaluating products. It is not clear, however, what causes certain attributes to be important in the first place. The current work starts with the broad notion that attributes that are related to activated goals should exert a greater impact on overall product evaluation. This means that the ability of a particular attribute to fulfill a goal should have a greater impact on overall product evaluation when the goal is activated. We further suggest that this effect is moderated by the extent to which the goal “fits” with the particular product. That is, consumers view the product as an appropriate means to fulfill the particular goal. The results of two experiments provided support for our hypotheses.

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Extended Abstract

Understanding how consumers evaluate products is a central topic in marketing research. Most approaches focus on the way in which consumers use information about specific features of the product to reach an overall judgment. Some research focuses on the way consumers compare attributes across products (e.g., Bettman, Luce and Payne, 2008), while other research examines how consumers combine attribute information (e.g., Cohen, Fishbein and Ahtola, 1972). Still other research focuses on the way consumers process arguments (e.g., information about attributes; e.g., Chen and Chaiken, 1999). While each approach is clearly important, very little work examines what makes particular attributes important to consumers in the first place.

The current work adopts the broad perspective that product attributes are important to the extent that they can fulfill consumers’ activated goals. Product evaluation involves judging the “goodness” or “usefulness” of a product, which implicitly involves references to consumers’ underlying goals. This is consistent with the perspective that objects, more generally, are evaluated as good or bad depending on their ability to help meet or hinder individuals’ goals (Markman and Brendl 2000).

This leads to a number of specific predictions about the way in which goals and attributes are likely to jointly impact product evaluation. First, attributes related to goals should be more likely to impact overall product evaluation. Specifically, the better able the attribute is perceived to fulfill the activated goal, the more positive the product evaluation. There is some evidence consistent with this in the satisfaction literature. Garbarino and Johnson (2001) found that consumers were more satisfied with a theatre performance when it fulfilled the particular goals they held (e.g., cultural enrichment versus relaxation). Moreover, this effect should be moderated by the activation of the goal (i.e., whether it occupies consumers’ thoughts)—this means that the ability of an attribute to fulfill a goal should have a greater impact on overall product evaluation when the goal is activated than not. We test this idea in our first study.

Second, while activated goals might render relevant attributes more important to the overall evaluation of the product, not all goals are likely to be relevant to all products. In fact, some products are likely to be viewed as unlikely candidates for fulfilling certain goals. For example, consumers rarely seem to consider the environmental impact of the wine they purchase, or whether or not the tea they drink comes from fair trade sources. Yet many consumers fret about the environmental impact of the bottles their water comes in and frequently consider whether their coffee is fairly traded. In short, certain products are likely to “fit” well with certain goals, and poorly with others. If the product and goal do not fit, then attributes relevant to that goal should be unlikely to exert an important influence on the overall evaluation, even when the goal is important. We test this idea in our second study. Specifically, we attempt to manipulate the extent to which consumers perceive a “fit” between a particular product and goal, as well as the ability of the product to fulfill that goal.

Study 1

One hundred and thirty-nine students participated in a 2 (Attribute Ability: Low vs. High) x 2 (Goal Activation: Yes vs. No) between-subjects factorial design. Students were presented with information for a brand of coffee that, among other attributes, was said to contain either 5% (low ability) or 75% (high ability) fair trade beans. Goal activation was manipulated in an article ostensibly from an online coffee guide that participants read prior to product evaluation. Both articles were identical except for a short addition in the Goal Activation condition that mentioned fair trade could bring many benefits to coffee farmers. Participants then completed thought listings (i.e. to measure goal activation) and measures of their evaluation of the coffee. Examination of the thoughts listings showed that participants generated more thoughts related to the fair trade in the Goal Activation conditions ($X^2(136)=4.53, p<.05$). Consistent with our predictions, a significant Attribute Ability x Goal Activation interaction ($F(1, 135)=5.59, p<.05$) indicated that the effect of attribute ability on product evaluation was more pronounced when the goal was activated (goal activated: $M_s=3.69$ vs. 5.06; $F(1, 135)=21.72, p<.05$; goal not activated: $M_s=4.20$ vs. 4.58; $F(1, 135)=1.72, p>.1$).
Study 2

One hundred and twenty-one students participated in a 2 (Attribute Ability: Low vs. High) x 2 (Goal-Product Fit: Low vs. High) between-subjects factorial design. Participants saw information about a pair of binoculars that, among other attributes, contained information about the lens material. Half of the participants were told that the lenses were made from optical eco-glass (a lead and arsenic free product) (high ability to fulfill environmental goals). The remaining participants were told simply that the lenses were constructed out of optical glass (low ability to fulfill environmental goals). Goal-product fit was manipulated in an article, ostensibly from an online binocular guide, that participants read prior to product evaluation. The article was identical in each condition except for a short addition in the High Goal-Product Fit conditions that mentioned binoculars, as with all products, are associated with certain environmental impact. A significant Attribute Ability x Goal-Product Fit interaction ($F(1, 117)=5.13, p<.05$) indicated that High Ability led to more favorable product attitudes when Goal-Product Fit was high ($M_{s}=5.23$ vs. $4.30$; $F(1, 117)=6.22, p<.05$), but not when it was low ($M_{s}=5.13$ vs. $5.41$; $F<1$).

To summarize, existing work shows that individual product attributes contribute to its overall evaluation, but little work addresses the question of what makes particular attributes important to consumers. The current work demonstrates that the importance of individual attributes depends, in part, on the extent to which they can fulfill activated consumer goals. Our research further contributes to this literature by making specific predictions about the way in which goals influence the role of attributes in product evaluation. First, goals that are activated were more likely to strengthen the impact of goal-relevant attributes on product evaluation. When a goal not activated, the ability of the attribute to fulfill the goal had little effect on product evaluation. Second, for goals to influence the impact of attributes on product evaluation there needs to be a perceived fit with the product. That is, products should be seen as appropriate means to fulfill particular goals if relevant attributes are to impact the overall evaluation of the product. Consistent with this, good performance on an attribute was more likely to result in more favorable product attitudes when goal-product fit was high.

References


The Rebound of the Forgone Alternative

Zachary Arens, University of Maryland, USA
Rebecca Hamilton, University of Maryland, USA

Consumers often face choices requiring a trade-off between valued alternatives. Consider a consumer who wants to purchase a relaxing massage as well as a new pair of sneakers for exercising. Looking in her wallet, she finds that she only has enough money for one of these purchases. After difficult consideration, she decides to purchase the massage and forgo the sneakers. In this research, we examine what happens to her desire for the forgone alternative, the sneakers, after she has chosen and consumed the massage.

There are two bodies of literature that offer conflicting predictions as to the fate of the forgone alternative. The free choice paradigm suggests that consumers derogate the value of forgone alternative relative to the value of the chosen alternative. This spreading-of-alternatives effect is based on cognitive dissonance theory, which argues that dissonance is created by focusing on the positive attributes of the forgone alternative and negative attributes of the chosen one (Brehm 1956; Festinger 1957). Thus, consumers alter their attitudes towards these alternatives postchoice to support their choice behavior. In the first demonstration of this effect, Brehm (1956) asked participants to rank the desirability of a variety of small gift items (e.g., a toaster, coffee-maker, art book) and then choose between two products to take home as a thank-you gift. After participants made their choices, Brehm re-measured the desirability of each item and found that when the choice produced dissonance (i.e., the choice set alternatives were both highly valued) the desirability of the selected alternative increased but the forgone alternative decreased.

However, research on motivation suggests a different outcome. It proposes that the forgone alternative will remain desirable regardless of the choice. In other words, choosing one alternative does not deactivate the goal associated with the forgone alternatives and thus, goal instrumental objects should remain desirable (Markman and Brendl 2000).

This research seeks to reconcile these two views by demonstrating that both are correct depending on the stage in the consumption process. Once a choice has been made, potential distractions, such as the forgone alternative, are automatically devalued to help ensure effective action toward achieving the chosen alternative (Brendl, Markman, and Messner 2003; Harmon-Jones and Harmon-Jones 2002). After the action is complete (i.e., the chosen alternative is consumed), though, the desirability of the forgone alternative will rebound. Specifically, we predict that after choice but prior to consumption consumers will derogate the desirability of the forgone alternative relative to the desirability of the chosen alternative, in accordance with the cognitive dissonance paradigm. However, after consumption, consumers will enhance the desirability of the forgone alternative but derogate the desirability of the chosen alternative. In short, the value of the forgone alternative will rebound.