The Role of Arousal in Schema Based Evaluations
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This research tests the link between a person’s state of arousal and the schema congruity effect. The results show consumers prefer moderately incongruent products more when experiencing high arousal. However, consistent with the belief that extreme incongruity results in arousal overload, consumers prefer extremely incongruent products more under low arousal.

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The Role of Arousal in Schema-based Evaluation
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction and Theoretical Background

From Nintendo’s Wii U to Apple’s rumoured iWatch to Ne-throne’s office workstation, marketers today are regularly challenged to design products that appeal to consumers while simultaneously being unique enough to create a distinct brand impression. Research has demonstrated that this can be challenging, as a product’s attractiveness varies with the extent to which it is congruent with the consumer’s product schema. Although a significant amount of research in marketing has examined this phenomenon, the results have been mixed (e.g., Campbell and Goodstein 2001; Jhang, Grant, and Campbell 2012; Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989). In this research we contribute to the extant literature by examining the interplay between a person’s state of arousal and the schema congruity effect.

Interestingly, the schema congruity effect suggests that an optimal level of arousal could be achieved when an object is just slightly incongruent (moderate incongruity) and thus the individual can successfully assimilate it into an existing schema held in memory (Mandler, 1982). However, when incongruity levels rise past a certain threshold (extreme incongruity), a person’s ability to make sense of the object diminishes exponentially (Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989). At the same time, although it is has been well-established that the valence of consumers’ affective states influences choice (Kim et al. 2010), only recently has research demonstrated that a person’s level of arousal has analogous effects. Specifically, when a consumer experiences a pleasant affective state, they prefer more arousing products if their current arousal is high and less arousing products if their current arousal is low (Di Muro and Murray 2012). Given that incongruity increases arousal levels, consumers in a pleasant affective state who are experiencing high arousal should prefer moderately incongruent products to congruent products because they misattribute their current arousal onto the product. However, consumers in a pleasant affective state who are experiencing low arousal should not prefer moderately incongruent products to congruent products because they cannot misattribute their current arousal onto the product. Thus, if the schema congruity effect is indeed predicated on a misattribution of arousal, preference for moderately incongruent products should only manifest under high arousal. Our first study examines this prediction.

Study 1

Participants and Design

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (product congruity: congruent vs. moderately incongruent) × 2 (arousal: low vs. high) between-subjects design. The target product was a fictitious brand of wristwatch (Dali).

Procedures and Dependent Measures

Arousal was manipulated using music: participants were informed they would be listening to a selection of classical music to help get them energized (relaxed). Following the arousal manipulation, participants viewed the ad.

Results

When participants were put in an aroused state, they evaluated the moderately incongruent wristwatch more favorably than the congruent wristwatch. However, when participants were put in a relaxed state, evaluations did not differ by the level of congruity. A planned contrast confirmed that participants evaluated the moderately incongruent product more favorably when arousal levels were high rather than low.

It should be noted that Mandler (1982) argued that extreme incongruity often leads to frustration because the individual is unable to assimilate or accommodate the object into an existing schema without revamping the schema itself or developing an entirely new schema. In such a case, the act of discovery becomes too arousing, resulting in negative evaluations of the target (Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989). This affords a unique means to test our proposition. Where in study 1, an aroused individual appreciated moderate incongruity and a relaxed individual did not, study 2 was designed to explore whether the opposite will occur in instances of extreme incongruity. If the schema congruity effect is truly a misattribution of arousal, then putting an individual in a relaxed state should offset the tension that results from not being able to accommodate the object. Therefore, it is predicted that a relaxed individual will appreciate extreme incongruity more so than would an aroused individual, because there is no arousal overload and thus there is nothing to misattribute to the target.

Study 2

Participants and Design

Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a 2 (arousal: low vs. high) × 3 (product congruity: congruent vs. moderately incongruent vs. extreme incongruity) between-subjects design. The target product was soft drinks.

Procedures and Dependent Measures

Several pictures from the International Affective Picture System (IAPS; Lang, Bradley, and Cuthbert 1999) were used to manipulate physiological arousal. The subsequent procedures were identical to study 1.

Results

Pairwise comparisons confirmed that when arousal was high, participants evaluated the moderately incongruent soft drink more favorably than the congruent soft drink, but evaluated the extremely incongruent soft drink less favorably than the congruent soft drink. Once again, a planned contrast confirmed that participants evaluated the moderately incongruent product more favorably when their arousal level was high rather than low. However, in support of the core prediction, participants evaluated the extremely incongruent product more favorably when their arousal level was low rather than high.

Contribution

A major contribution of this work is that consumers’ state of arousal when examining incongruity will influence whether or not the schema congruity effect will manifest. This suggests that the schema congruity may indeed result from a misattribution of arousal. This is something that has been debated in numerous fields. The results demonstrated that consumers preferred moderate incongruity when their current level of arousal was high rather than low. This finding is consistent with the arousal congruity effect (Di Muro
and Murray 2012), whereby a fit is created between an individual’s state of arousal and the arousal derived from the act of discovery. However, consistent with Mandler’s (1982) prediction that extreme incongruity can result in negative evaluations due to arousal overload, consumers preferred extreme incongruity when their current level of arousal was low rather than high.

REFERENCES