Assimilation and Contrast in Brand and Product Evaluations: Implications for Marketing
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ABSTRACT
The paper describes a framework according to which the same piece of information may elicit assimilation or contrast in the evaluation of a target. Thus, a brand extension may either help or hurt the brand and vice versa, a top-of-the-line product may increase or decrease the attractiveness of other models of the product line. Whether contrast or assimilation occurs is not solely determined by the features of the stimuli as other models would predict. We show how marketing strategies may moderate the impact of a stimulus and determine whether, for example, the top-of-the-line-model helps or hurts its younger siblings.

That the perception and evaluation of stimuli is influenced by the context in which we perceive and evaluate them is common knowledge and almost trivial. What makes context effects, nevertheless, interesting is that contextual influences may take quite opposite forms. For example, we may wonder whether an average car looks more expensive when displayed in a range of up-scale cars or whether it looks cheaper. The former assimilation effect, a shift in the evaluation of a target towards the context evaluation, may be plausible because the up-scale range provides a standard of comparison against which the target car looks less posh. Clearly, the latter contrast effect, a shift in the evaluation of a target away from the context evaluation, may be plausible (among other accounts) because we perceive the target car as part of the range. The latter contrast effect, a shift in the evaluation of the target away from the context evaluation, may be plausible because the up-scale range provides a standard of comparison against which the target car looks less posh. Clearly, the question that has been intriguing psychologists and other scholars alike is: What determines whether a context stimulus elicits assimilation or contrast in a target evaluation? The present paper gives a very short review of the basic mechanisms underlying assimilation and contrast effects (for a more detailed review see Schwarz & Bless, 1992a). Following this, we will present an overview of several studies in the marketing domain, which demonstrate how marketers can use these basic processes in order to elicit specific brand or product evaluations.

THE ROLE OF CATEGORIZATION IN THE EMERGENCE OF CONTEXT EFFECTS
When searching for variables that determine whether assimilation or contrast occurs one is often confronted with evidence pointing to the nature of the stimuli such as typicality or extremity (e.g. Bless & Wänke, in press; Herr, 1986; Kunda & Oleson, 1995; Loken & Roedder John, 1993; Weber & Crocker, 1983). It should be noted, however, that in the respective theoretical conceptualizations the mediating variable is not the nature of the stimuli per se. Rather, the nature of the stimuli may influence how these stimuli will be categorized. For example, Herr and his colleagues (1986; Herr, Sherman & Fazio, 1983) argued that moderate context stimuli facilitate that an ambitious target stimulus is assigned to the same category while it is less likely that the target is categorized with extreme context stimuli. Integrating the many findings regarding the emergence of assimilation and contrast

Schwarz and Bless (1992a,b) suggested a general framework. In short, it is assumed that when individuals form a judgment about a target stimulus they first need to retrieve a cognitive representation of it. In addition, they need to determine a standard of comparison to evaluate the target (Kahneman & Miller, 1986). Both, the representation of the target, and of the standard of comparison are, in part, context dependent because individuals do not retrieve all knowledge that may bear on the target or on the standard. Rather, individuals rely on the subset of potentially relevant information that is most accessible at the time of judgment, and which may be accessible because of the situational context (see Bodenhausen & Wyer, 1987; Higgins, 1989; for reviews). The impact of the accessible information depends on how it is categorized. Context information will result in an assimilation effect if it is included into the temporary representation that individuals form of the target.

Highly accessible information, however, is not always used for constructing a representation of the target. For various reasons, individuals may exclude information that comes to mind from the representation of the target. If the valence of this information is more extreme than the valence of the remaining information a less extreme evaluation is likely (subtraction effect) and contrast may be observed. Moreover, the information that is excluded from the representation of the stimulus may be used when individuals construct a relevant standard of comparison. If the valence of this information is more extreme than the valence of other information used in constructing the standard, it results in a more extreme standard of comparison, and hence in contrast effects.

Clearly, the central issue in this framework is that assimilation or contrast is not a function of the nature of the stimuli but of the categorization decision, that is, whether a particular piece of information is included in the representation of the target or the standard. Of course, the categorization decision may be largely influenced by the nature of the stimuli but one may also assume that other factors may play a role.

RELEVANCE FOR MARKETING
The notion that categorization, and thus assimilation and contrast, may not necessarily be stimulus determined should be highly relevant to marketers. If categorization were merely a function of the nature of the products, marketers had little influence on the outcome of category-based judgments. In contrast, the notion of flexible categorization suggests that marketers may draw on a broader range of manipulations to influence consumers' categorization of a given brand and extension.

Demonstrating the impact of arbitrary categorization tasks on consumer judgment, Wänke, Bless & Schwarz (in press) presented four consumer goods (wine, lobster, cigarettes and a TV-guide) and manipulated explicit categorization instructions. For example participants were instructed to group the food products together (wine and lobster) or the items that need to be sold within a relatively shorter period (lobster and TV-guide). When the instructions induced participants to assign wine and lobster to the same category, they subsequently evaluated wine more favorably than when instructions induced them to assign wine and lobster to different categories. These differences in evaluations were obtained despite the fact that the same range of products was presented to all participants. The observation that categorization decisions can be

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driven by variables that are unrelated to the products’ features has important implications for marketers. In the following, we will illustrate this by reviewing our research on the transfer of brand beliefs to the brand extension, and the impact of a top-of-the-line-product on the brand and other models of the brand.

TRANSFER OF BRAND IMAGE TO EXTENSIONS

Being able to influence categorization decisions broadens the range of marketing strategies that may be used to facilitate the transfer of brand beliefs and it potentially frees brand policy from the restrictions imposed by given brand characteristics. Rather than seeking suitable extensions, managers may seek marketing strategies that facilitate the inclusion of a given extension into the brand. Below, we will cite research how inclusion may be elicited by product names or advertising strategies. However, the dynamics outlined above also suggest that a failure to elicit inclusion and thus assimilation effects may cause severe consequences. If, instead of inclusion, exclusion occurs contrast effects are likely. For example, in one study (Wänke, Bress & Schwarz, 1998), participants were given a description of a compact car, named Winston Milano, and evaluated this car on several dimensions. In sum, these dimensions assessed the trendiness image of the car (young, fun, fast, active etc.). In one condition, participants only read the description of the target car while in two other conditions they were also given information about the parent brand, Winston, and its other cars, all sportcars. However, these two conditions differed insofar as the name Winston Milano either continued the line of previous sportscars, which also bore names of Italian cities, or symbolized a discontinuation when the previous sportscars were named after geometric figures. Other than that the previous line did not differ between these two conditions nor did the target car differ between any of the three conditions. Nevertheless, participants who were not highly knowledgeable about cars evaluated the target car as more trendy, and thus more in line with the previous cars, when its name symbolized continuation rather discontinuation. Demonstrating the relevance of contrast effects most impressively, the evaluation in the discontinuation condition was even less trendy than if participants did not know about the compact car’s parent brand, clearly reflecting a contrast effect. Apparently, coming from a sportcar manufacturer decreased the car’s trendiness if at the same time its name symbolized a differentiation from the previous sportscars.

It should be noted that these effects were only found for non-experts while participants who reported having more knowledge about cars were not affected by either the name continuation or name discontinuation manipulation. We assume that this reflects that the experts could draw on a larger amount of chronically accessible information about cars in constructing representations of the target and a standard, thus diluting the impact of the temporarily accessible contextual information. In general, the impact of a given piece of information rendered accessible by the context decreases, as the amount and extremity of other information included in the representation increases. Note that the other information need not be chronically accessible as it was in the described study. In a different content domain, we also found evidence that the impact of a particular piece of context information decreases the more relevant information is made accessible by the context (Bless, Schwarz, Igou & Wänke, 1998).

RECIPROCITY EFFECTS

While the impact of the brand on any of its products or models is a major topic in marketing the reverse relationship may be of even higher concern. On the one hand, marketers fear that a failure may taint the whole brand or that atypical products may dilute the brand image. On the other hand, marketers hope that the top-of-the-line or flagship models will, pars pro toto, improve the image of the whole brand. Given these concerns, marketers are in need of strategies that would help them regulate the impact of a particular brand-member on the whole brand. Such strategies would allow them either to restrict the potential damage to the respective product rather than letting it generalize to the whole brand, or, vice versa, to exploit a particular product image for the benefit of the whole brand. Based on the dynamics specified above, we would suggest that strategies aimed for eliciting exclusion of the product from the mental representation of the brand should be implemented when the generalization to the brand is undesired. Vice versa, strategies aimed for product inclusion are advised when generalization to the brand is desired. Again, we point to the potential hazard of achieving effects opposite of what one was aiming for. A study on the impact of a top-of-the-line product on the evaluation of the whole brand illustrates how subtle variations may cause inclusion and thus assimilation or exclusion and contrast (Wänke, 1996).

Consumers in a supermarket were shown a leaflet depicting canned soups of a well-known brand. This brand had recently restructured their soups into a regular line, a line featuring international specialities, a line of hearty stews and a gourmet line. The leaflet either showed all lines together on one page (inclusion) or a mix of all lines except the gourmet line, which was shown on the same page but separated from the others (exclusion). The display significantly affected the judgments. Consumers evaluated the brand more favorably, reported higher purchase interest and interest in other products of the brand after being shown the display with the gourmet line included as part of the brand as compared to consumers who did not see a product display prior to their judgments (control group). This would indicate that bringing the gourmet line towards consumers’ attention increased their brand evaluation as would certainly be the managerial desire. However, most notably, compared to the control group consumers evaluated the brand less favorably, reported lower purchase interest, and interest in other brand products after being shown the display in which the gourmet line was depicted separated from the other lines. In addition, as a behavioral indication for the power of such subtle manipulations less consumers chose a gift from the target brand in the exclusion condition than in the control group. The results indicate that high-lighting the top-of-the-line model in this fashion apparently harmed the brand as a whole. We argue that following the separate depiction consumers excluded the gourmet line from their brand representation (subtraction effects) and may have used it as a standard against which they compared the other lines. The lesson for marketers is that launching a high quality product is not sufficient for creating a favorable brand image, in fact, it may harm. Marketers also need to ensure that consumers include this product into their brand representation. Only then can they hope that the brand will benefit. Otherwise it may pose as a standard of comparison to the brand or its other models of the brand. The next section will elaborate further on the impact of an extreme model on other models of the brand.

INFLUENCES BETWEEN BRAND MODELS

Of course, managers also need to ask whether what is good for the brand is good for all individual brand models. Indeed, this may be questionable in case of promoting the top-of-the-line product. Even if consumers include this prominent model in their brand representation and its good reputation increases the favorability of the brand image, one may speculate whether the top-of-the-line model would not hurt other individual brand models by providing
a highly favorable standard of comparison. Compared to the flagship any other model may look less attractive. This assumption is supported by evidence from the political judgment domain. Activating a scandal-involved politician decreased people's trust in the general category of politicians (assimilation) but increased trust in individual politicians not involved in the scandal (contrast) (Schwarz & Bless, 1992c).

On the other hand, the studies described above suggest a possible alternative. It was shown that the evaluation of a target product may be assimilated to the brand evaluation if it is included in the brand (Wanke, Bless & Schwarz, 1998). It was further shown that the brand evaluation improves when the top-of-the-line model is included in the brand representation. In combination, given the inclusion of a top-of-the-line model, we may thus also assume that the evaluation of each model that is included in the brand representation improves. This assumption was supported by a study in which ads for toasters were presented (Wanke, 1996; Wanke, Bless & Igou, 1998). The evaluations of two moderately featured toasters of different brands decreased when an ad for an extremely well-equipped toaster was added to the range. This high-end model apparently elicited contrast in other less well equipped models, and this was independent of whether the more modern model belonged to the same brand or a competitor brand. Merely carrying the same brand name was apparently not enough to prevent contrast. However, when the ad for the high-end toaster and the ad for one of the standard toasters emphasized their common brand membership by carrying the same logo, same color, same header and by other superficial features a contrast effect was observed only for the more moderate toaster of the different brand but not for the same brand sibling. Although the copy of the ad was held constant in both conditions creating similar looking ads helped to emphasize the brand identity and interfered with contrast effects. As a result the moderately featured toaster now had an advantage over the similarly moderate competitor, as this was still hurt by the contrast to the top-of-the-line-model.

Additional analyses suggest that the benefit from the top-of-the-line model in the brand identity condition was indeed mediated by the brand evaluation. In fact, in both ad conditions, the top-of-the-line model elicited contrast. But when the ads emphasized the common brand membership this contrast effect was offset by the assimilation towards the improved brand evaluation.

The result that a top-of-the-line model may elicit contrast in the evaluation of a model of a different brand but that contrast in the evaluation of a same brand model may be over-ridden by assimilation suggests that a top-of-the-line model may induce a differentiation in a range of otherwise rather similar models. Superficially this result is similar to the “attraction effect” (Huber, Payne, & Puto, 1982; Huber & Puto, 1983), according to which under some conditions the attractiveness of one alternative A may increase against an alternative B when a third alternative C is added, which is inferior to (dominated by) alternative A. Different from this literature, our results show a shift in attractiveness after the addition of a clearly superior or dominant model. More importantly, here, it is not the addition per se that affects the relative advantage of one or the other alternative. Rather the effect of the addition depended on how the addition was categorized in relation to the other elements. This again points to the crucial role played by the categorization of stimuli, which may be more important than the nature of the stimuli.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In summary, the flexibility of contextual influences holds interesting implications for marketers. Those concerned with managing the perceived quality of a consumer product may want to seek particular context stimuli in order to benefit from them and avoid others which exert a negative influence. Often, however, the accessibility of particular context stimuli is beyond a marketer's control. However, whether a particular stimulus exerted negative or positive influence depends on its categorization. In this regard, our findings draw attention to the emergence of contrast effects in the evaluation of brand or products, reflecting the use of the context information as a standard of comparison. Hence, the worst outcome of a failed brand extension is not the mere absence of a transfer of brand beliefs, but a backfire effect by which a positive brand not only fails to help the extension, but actually hurts it. Likewise, a sub-optimal campaign of high-lighting top-of-the-line models may not merely have no effect on the brand evaluation but may induce a positive standard of comparison by which other models of the brand look pale. Having pointed out the crucial role of categorization, we add that this categorization can be externally influenced.

By affecting the categorization one can influence whether a target will benefit rather than suffer from a positive context stimulus. Research in brand extensions, for example, has assumed that whether or not brand extensions are successful depends on the perceived similarity between the new model and the brand because similarity determines whether consumers assign the new model to the brand category (e.g. Boush & Loken, 1991; Boush et al., 1987). We suggest that categorization processes can be manipulated independent of the perceived similarity. Thus, marketers are not merely a victim of product features but may actively determine product categorizations. Possible means for how to affect product categorization may be found in shelving, pairing products in promotions, advertising strategies and others. Consumers may be instigated to categorize products according to brands, country-of-origin, or the "kind of products sold in this specific outlet" in order to elicit assimilation between the product and the super-ordinate category or between various products. It seems relatively easy to design communications that elicit such categorizations, as our research demonstrates. In summary, our findings highlight that context is not destiny: While marketers may often be unable to change the context in which a product or person is evaluated, they may be able to influence how the given contextual stimuli are used.

REFERENCES


