

SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY

Memory Accessibility and Product Judgment

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Three papers were presented that investigate the effects of accessibility of information in memory on product judgment.

The first paper, by Tybout, Sternthal, Malaviya, Bakamitson, and Park, addresses a paradoxical set of results. Prior research suggests that asking consumers to generate multiple reasons to buy a product can have both positive and negative effects on product judgments. The authors investigate the conditions under which these effects occur. Their results show that the effects of generating reasons are moderated by the accessibility of the reasons in memory. When the reasons are highly accessible or inaccessible, asking for more reasons prompts more favorable judgments. Between these extremes in accessibility, asking for more reasons prompts less favorable judgments. The authors argue that these results are driven by the independent operation of two memory processes—one involves using the content of the retrieved information as a basis for judgment (i.e., evaluation is based on the diagnosticity of the accessible information), while the other involves monitoring of the retrieval process and then making a judgment based on how easy it is to retrieve the information (i.e., evaluation is based on the accessibility of the information). When accessibility of reasons in memory is very low, consumers do not perceive ease of retrieval to be diagnostic of their feelings about a product. In such a situation, product judgments are based on the content of the information available (with more positive information being retrieved when asked to generate more rather than fewer reasons). When accessibility of reasons in memory is very high, retrieval ease is again not perceived as diagnostic and product judgments are again based on the content of the information considered. Between these levels of accessibility, ease of retrieval is perceived as diagnostic and the difficulty of retrieving many reasons has a negative effect on product judgments. Four experiments support these hypotheses.

In the second paper, Vanhouche and van Osselaer report four experiments showing that attributes that often bias product judgments can also enhance the accuracy of product judgments by making individual consumption experiences more accessible in memory. Specifically, the authors show that adding product information (e.g., irrelevant attribute information) that initially biases product evaluations because consumers expect it to be correlated with product quality even when it is not, can actually make those evaluations more accurate over time. This happens because the added information does not merely function as a general heuristic cue that biases judgment. It can also help consumers access specific product experiences in memory. The authors find that this is not only the case when the biasing cue and actual quality are completely uncorrelated. For example, when price and quality were positively correlated across products but one product featured a high price and low quality, post-experience quality judgments for the latter product were more accurate than when no price cue was added. Finally, the authors also find that potentially-biasing cues, such as price, may have an even stronger exemplar-memory-enhancing effect than cues that consumers do not expect to be related to product quality. This might be the case because violations of quality expectations lead to better encoding of experiences in memory.

In the third paper, four experiments by Lee and Labroo examine the role of memory accessibility in yet a different way. The authors investigate how accessibility of the target product may serve as the basis of product judgment. Specifically, the authors

suggest that accessibility of a product in memory may be defined in terms of how easy it can be recognized (i.e., perceptual fluency) or how quickly it comes to mind (i.e., conceptual fluency). They further propose that consumers may develop a more favorable attitude toward a product when the product becomes more accessible in memory, either perceptually or conceptually. Their results across three experiments show that enhancing perceptual or conceptual fluency of the target increases liking for the target. In addition, the experiments provide evidence that conceptual and perceptual fluency effects on affective responses are additive. Finally, the authors present results suggesting that whereas perceptual fluency always has a positive effect on consumer attitudes, conceptual fluency may lead to less favourable attitudes when negatively valenced associations are being primed.

Wyer provided an overview of research on accessibility and judgment and pointed out the papers' contributions and outstanding questions within this context. Specifically, he explored how the direct effect of ease of retrieval and the content effect in the paper by Tybout et al. might combine to influence judgment. Do they jointly influence judgments, with more influence of the process that is stronger in the particular context, or do the processes combine according to a race model in which the winning process "takes all"? Wyer pointed out that Vanhouche and van Osselaer's results may be dependent on the type of goal participants had during processing and on dependent measures—recall of the quality of previously-encountered products versus judgments of those products' current desirability. In addition, he asked whether the added cue (e.g., price, irrelevant attribute) had a direct effect on memory or made participants encode other product information better. Finally, Wyer related Lee and Labroo's research on conceptual fluency to the activation of narratives in episodic memory, pointing out that narrative representations of information can often have stronger effects on judgment than information presented in other forms. If conceptual fluency is based in narrative episodic memory, perceptual fluency effects seems to be based in semantic memory processes, explaining the additivity of the two types of fluency effects.

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