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Experiential product attributes and preferences for new products: The role of processing fluency

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ABSTRACT

This study shows how experiential product attributes that are part of the design of new products can create compelling consumer experiences. Following processing-fluency theory, when consumers attend to experiential attributes (sensory or affective), they should process them fluently (i.e., spontaneously and with little effort); however, consumers should process functional attributes always deliberately, irrespective of whether or not they attend to them. An experiment testing the fluency hypothesis confirms that the processing of experiential attributes, but not functional attributes, depends on attention focus. When consumers focus their attention on specific experiential features, products with experiential attributes are evaluated more positively. In contrast, the processing of functional attributes does not depend on attention focus. Further confirming the fluency hypothesis, the experiment also shows that presentation duration does not affect the processing of experiential attributes but does affect the processing of functional attributes. The authors discuss how marketers can use experiential product design in market segmentation and innovation.

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1. Introduction

Traditionally, marketing research has focused on functional product attributes that engage consumers in a deliberate reasoning process. Consumers use such functional attributes to justify their product judgments and choices (Shafir, Simonson, & Tversky, 1993; Simonson, 1989). However, at comparable price points, products in many categories are functionally highly similar. Therefore, consumers may have difficulties differentiating products based on evaluations of functional attributes alone.

Thus, marketers have developed an alternative way of differentiating their products. They have started to create compelling experiences for consumers through design that emphasizes experiential, non-functional product characteristics (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009).

2. Design and experience

Some of the most intriguing and successful new products and brands of the past couple of decades have focused on providing compelling experiences to customers through design that includes experiential attributes. The New Beetle car brand, in its design and marketing communications, featured novel color schemes and shapes. Apple, early on, used a "smiley" face that appeared on the screen of the computer after powering up. In the late 1990s, the company began using translucent colors and "soft" shapes to differentiate its iMac computers and then the iPod and iPad. Also, on its web-sites, in its Apple Stores and in communications, the company has prominently displayed the color schemes and shapes of its products. Similar design approaches that emphasize colors, shapes or affective cues such as a "smiley," on products, packaging, ads or web sites have been used in diverse industries, from consumer electronics, cars, and telecommunications to consumer commodities such as salt and bottled water. Innovative functional design certainly may be a part of the success of some of these products, too. However, to explain their performance in the marketplace by focusing only on functional attributes would be misleading. At least part of their success seems to be due to the innovative usage of non-functional, experiential design attributes.

Consumer research has shown that esthetically appealing product design leads to positive emotional reactions and has a positive effect

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on attitudes (Bloch, 1995; Page & Herr, 2002; Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998). Also, product design influences how consumers categorize brands and products, and thus shapes consumers' beliefs about them (Berkowitz, 1987; Bloch, 1995; Kreuzbauer & Malter, 2005).

Why can experiential features have such far-reaching positive effects? This article aims to explain the positive results of experiential attributes based on how consumers are able to process them relative to functional attributes. Drawing on processing-fluency theory (Schwarz & Clore, 1996; Winkielman, Schwarz, Fazendeiro, & Reber, 2003), the authors propose that under certain conditions consumers can process experiential attributes fluently, but they will not be able to process functional attributes in that way. Furthermore, when consumers process experiential attributes fluently, they evaluate the products with such features more positively than when they do not engage in fluent processing. Again, such effects will not occur for functional attributes.

Conceptually and empirically, this paper focuses on two types of experiential product attributes: sensory and affective. To be sure, other experiential attribute types and dimensions could exist; for example, Brakus et al. (2009) distinguish sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioral attributes. However, in the context of experiential product design, sensory and affective attributes seem to be the most relevant.

3. What are experiential attributes?

While the term "experiential" may refer to any attribute that people experience, to make the concept more amenable to empirical testing in the context of experiential design, this research uses a narrower definition. Specifically, the term "experiential attributes" here refers to sensory and affective attributes presented in a nonverbal way. Various marketing communications frequently use such an approach, for example, by presenting a color or shape rather than naming that color; or by presenting an emoticon of a "smiley face" rather than the word "smile;" or by presenting imagery-invoking words (e.g., "Hello Sunshine," as a VW Beetle ad has done) rather than purely descriptive words. Note that *experiential* attributes are not the same as *experience* attributes, a term that marketing scholars have used as well. In contrast to experiential attributes, experience attributes must be literally experienced ("tried out"), usually over an extended period of time, before consumers can judge them (e.g., handling of a car) (Nelson, 1974).

In sum, whereas functional attributes are utilitarian, experiential attributes are not. Whereas marketing research reports present functional attributes in a feature-based, informative verbal format (c.f. *Consumer Reports*-style "alternative-by-attribute" tables, e.g., "gas mileage: 22 miles per gallon"), experiential attributes do not provide "means to an end" (Zeithaml, 1988). Experiential attributes can appear on products, on packages, in logos, as part of ads, in shopping environments, or as backgrounds on web sites (Henderson, Cote, Leong, & Schmitt, 2003; Mandel & Johnson, 2002; Schmitt & Simonson, 1997; Spies, Hesse, & Loesch, 1997).

4. Research on consumer experiences

Consumer research has studied how experiences arise and what role experiences play when consumers examine products, when they shop for them, and when they consume them (Arnould, Price, & Zinkhan, 2002). For example, research on product experience has studied consumers' interaction with a product and how seeing an ad for a product and then interacting with the same product affects product judgments and recall of product-related information (Hoch & Deighton, 1989; Hoch & Ha, 1986; Huffman & Houston, 1993; van Osselaer & Janiszewski, 2001). Research on shopping experience has investigated the relationship between atmospheric variables (e.g., lighting, background scent, music) as well as salespersons' behavior and the resulting experience (Arnould, Reynolds, Ponder, & Lueg, 2005; Ibrahim & Ng, 2002; Jones, 1999; Turley & Milliman, 2000). Finally, the interpretive research on consumption experience has looked at hedonic goal pursuit and emotional states during the consumption of, for example, games, museums, river rafting, baseball, and skydiving (Arnould & Price, 1993; Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993; Holbrook, Chestnut, Oliva, & Greenleaf, 1984; Holt, 1995; Joy & Sherry, 2003).

In addition, prior consumer research has studied consumers' experiences with brands and brand evaluations. Chang and Chieng (2006) show that individual and shared customer experiences affect brand attitudes. Brakus et al. (2009) show that brand experiences are positively related to customer satisfaction and loyalty.

However, prior research on consumer experiences has not studied how the processing of experiential product attributes leads to consumer judgments. For example, in the research on product experiences (Hoch & Deighton, 1989; Hoch & Ha, 1986; Huffman & Houston, 1993; van Osselaer & Janiszewski, 2001), consumers first learn about the functional product attributes from an ad and then they interact with the product to verify the advertised claims (or the other way around) but they do not make a judgment. The experiences, in this context, merely provide means of testing the advertised claims about the product performance and functionality. Similarly, in the studies on shopping experiences, consumers physically interact with the aspects of environment, for example, scents, background music, lightning, and shop assistants (Turley & Milliman, 2000), but they do not make a judgment. Finally, the cited interpretive research focuses on analyzing the process of going through an activity (or a set of activities), but again not on judgment.

The only study that addresses judgments resulting from experiential attributes is a study by Brakus, Schmitt, and Zhang (2008) where the evoked experience seems to affect consumer preferences when contextual cues prime experiential attributes. To explain the effect, the authors speculate that the stimulus-cuing process – between the experiential contextual cues and experiential product attributes – may be spontaneous, resulting in more positive consumers' evaluations of the alternative which is differentiated with a "matching" experiential attribute. However, they did not offer any process-based data or an experiment to support their post hoc explanation. In this paper, we provide a theoretical account of the results obtained by Brakus et al. by using processing fluency theory (Schwarz & Clore, 1996; Winkielman et al., 2003). Brakus and colleagues' key claim is that consumers "spontaneously" respond to an experiential product attribute in the presence of a relevant (i.e., "matching") contextual cue. In fact, Alter and Oppenheimer (2009) suggest that any facilitating elements conducive to information processing can serve as the underlying process, yielding a quick and effortless evaluation that enhances a positive judgment.

In sum, previous research has shown several positive effects of consumer experiences but this research has mostly examined experiences as a set of physical activities encountered during product or service interactions. The research has not clearly linked the specific experiential product attributes to consumers' responses and judgments and the process that is responsible for this link. Here we examine the link between experiential attributes and judgments, and, most importantly, present processing-fluency theory as an explanation for the positive effects of experiential attributes.

5. Processing-fluency theory

In general, the theory distinguishes two modes of information processing: fluent processing, which is largely holistic and occurs without much deliberate reasoning, and less-fluent processing, which is rather step-by-step and deliberate. Processing fluency refers to varying degrees of effort and speed in information processing (Schwarz & Clore, 1996; Winkielman et al., 2003). Fluency is about the subjective ease with which one processes externally-presented stimuli. It leads individuals to adopt the quick, effortless and spontaneous judgment rendering process. In contrast, lack of fluency, due to the experienced difficulty during the processing, leads to systematic processing and elaboration (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009).

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