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The effect of structural alignment on choice-process satisfaction and preference formation: The moderating role of self-construal

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on theories of structural alignment and self-construal, this article suggests that individuals with an independent self-construal tend to rely on nonalignable attributes while those with an interdependent self-construal would put more emphasis on alignable attributes in decision process (Study 1) and preference formation (Study 2). Findings from the two studies provide support for these predictions. In Study 1, independent self-construal individuals were more satisfied and perceived more information in processing options with nonalignable attributes than with alignable attributes. Interdependent self-construal individuals, however, did not show differences in choice-process satisfaction and perceived amount of information between the two attribute conditions. It was also found in Study 2 that, in a two-option context, interdependent self-construal individuals preferred alignable better option to nonalignable better option significantly more than independent self-construal individuals did. Consistent with the preference data, independent self-construal individuals mentioned nonalignable attributes more frequently than interdependent self-construal individuals did.

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1. Introduction

In today's competitive business environment, convincing consumers to consider one brand above all others is a daunting task. Advertisers often resort to message strategies presenting one brand with comparably better attributes than those of competing brands (e.g., laptop with a 2 GB AMD processor vs. laptop with a 1.5 GB Intel processor) or one brand with distinctive and non-comparable attributes (e.g., laptop with a webcam vs. laptop with a wireless mouse).

Based on the structural alignment theory, attributes may be classified as common, alignable (comparable), and nonalignable (non-comparable). While different types of attributes are known to affect consumer information processing differently (Gentner & Markman, 1994, 1997; Markman & Medin, 1995), prior research has shown that alignable attributes tend to receive more attention, are easier to recall, and affect consumer judgment more than common and nonalignable attributes (Lee & Lee, 2007; Zhang, Kardes, & Cronley, 2002; Zhang & Markman, 1998). Since the structural alignment theory stipulates that nonalignable attributes are generally neglected (Zhang & Markman, 2001), it does not look into when and how nonalignable attributes

may play a part in consumer judgment. Nor does it explain how consumer or contextual variables moderate the alignability effect.

However, marketers these days often advertise and present products with nonalignable attributes to differentiate them from competing products. As such consumers must utilize nonalignable attributes to form their preferences. Therefore, from both theoretical and practical perspectives, it is important to explore when nonalignable attribute differences play a role in consumer judgment and preference formation. Until recently, another omission from structural alignment research, however, is the role of audience characteristics in processing different types of product attributes (see Malkoc, Zauberaman, & Ulu, 2005; Nam, Wang, & Lee, 2009). Consumers do not process information uniformly. Each person comes with a set of individual characteristics and may pay attention to different aspects of the same information (Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988). This prompted recent research on audience-related moderators to clarify the determinants of attribute alignability effectiveness.

Thus, this research examines the role of self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994; Triandis, 1989) in structural alignment effectiveness in advertising messages. Specifically, our studies will explore whether ad message effectiveness depends on the fit between the type of brand attributes in an ad (alignable vs. nonalignable) and the audience's dominant self-construal (independent vs. interdependent).

In Study 1, we examine the interactive effect of attribute type (alignable vs. nonalignable) and self-construal (independent vs.

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interdependent) on perceived amount of information and choice-process satisfaction in a three-choice-option situation. Study 2 is performed to investigate how self-construal influences consumer preference for options with different attribute types by asking consumers to choose between the alignable attribute-better and the nonalignable attribute-better options. Findings from the two experimental studies contribute to an understanding of factors that increase the effectiveness of marketing communication strategies for consumers with different self-construals. In the next sections, we review the literature on attribute alignability. We then distinguish between independent self individuals and interdependent self individuals and present the research hypotheses.

2. Literature review

2.1. Attribute alignability

Prior research focusing on the role of attribute relationships in the comparison and evaluation processes asserts that distinctive or different attributes in choice alternatives tend to gain more attention and hold more weight than common attributes. This is because distinctive or different attributes are more diagnostic in helping consumers compare between alternatives (Slovic & MacPhillamy, 1974; Tversky, 1977). Extending these ideas, structural alignment theory was proposed to explain a number of additional phenomena regarding differences (Gentner & Markman, 1994, 1997; Markman, 1998; Markman & Loewenstein, 2010; Markman & Medin, 1995; Medin, Goldstone, & Markman, 1995). According to the theory, product attributes are classified into three groups: common attributes whose attribute levels are identical across alternatives (e.g., both popcorns A & B are low salt), alignable attributes that are common but have different levels across alternatives (e.g., popcorn A comes with microwave bowl and popcorn B pops in its own bag), and nonalignable attributes with aspects that do not have a corresponding attribute in other alternatives (e.g., popcorn A is easy to swallow while popcorn B uses vegetable oil). Empirical research has demonstrated that alignable differences are predominantly used by consumers in choosing among alternatives, because common attributes do not discriminate among alternatives and nonalignable differences are difficult to process. However, alignable differences have the characteristics of both commonalities and differences, in that they are features of a pair in the same dimension but they are not exactly matching each other as in common attributes.

Prior research has found that compared to other types of attributes, alignable features are more likely to be recalled (Lee & Lee, 2007; Zhang & Markman, 1998), easier to pay attention to and elaborated on (Slovic & MacPhillamy, 1974), and evaluated more positively (Zhang et al., 2002). In addition, they improve consumer choice-process satisfaction more than nonalignable features do (Zhang & Fitzsimons, 1999). For example, when asked to recall brand attributes in a situation where attribute information of competing brands was also presented, people recalled more alignable attributes than nonalignable attributes (Lee & Lee, 2007). Markman and Medin (1995) asked participants to justify their judgments on choice of video games and found that subjects were more likely to justify their choices using alignable features between options than nonalignable attributes.

In a choice situation, Herrmann, Heitmann, Morgan, Henneberg, and Landwehr (2009) varied the proportion of alignable attributes and found that as the proportion increased, participants tended to choose products faster and pay more dollars for products with more alignable attributes. In a similar vein, people preferred products having more favorable alignable attributes to those having more favorable nonalignable attributes (Zhang & Markman, 2001).

In summary, research evidence suggests that when making comparisons among several options, consumers are more likely to pay more attention to and remember alignable attributes than nonalignable attributes. Given these, most research tends to focus on alignable attributes

whereas nonalignable attributes has received relatively limited attention.

More recently, research has begun to consider characteristics of the message recipients that may function as important moderators of the effectiveness of attribute alignability (Malkoc et al., 2005; Nam et al., 2009). For example, research on audience-related moderators such as temporal distance (Malkoc et al., 2005) and consumer expertise (Nam et al., 2009) has provided clarifications regarding determinants of attribute alignability effectiveness. Accordingly, the present research extends this line of inquiry by examining whether independent and interdependent self-construals moderate the impact of attribute alignability in the competitive advertising context. We predict that independent and interdependent tendencies will make a difference in people's choice process and preference formation in response to product options with different attribute types. Independent self-construal individuals are likely to put an emphasis on uniqueness and value nonalignable information more than alignable information. Meanwhile those with interdependent self-construal tend to focus on relationships between objects and evaluate products based on alignable rather than distinctive features. Below we explain the reasons for these propositions.

2.2. Self-construal

An individual's construal of the self has been known to affect that person's perception, evaluation, and behavior (Cousins, 1989; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For instance, Nisbett, Peng, Choi, and Norenzayan (2001) assert that those with independent self-construal prefer analytic to holistic thinking, focusing on focal information, whereas interdependent people tend to think holistically, processing both focal information and context.

Considerable research in social psychology has delineated the distinction between an independent and an interdependent self-construal (Oyserman & Lee, 2008). Self-construal reflects the degree to which people define themselves either as an independent unit or in relation to other group members. Those who have an independent self-construal consider their behavior as being "organized and made meaningful primarily by reference to one's own internal repertoire of thoughts, feelings, and actions, rather than by reference to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others" (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; p 226). However, people with interdependent self-construal consider themselves as connected to other group members.

Recent study findings in consumer research have shown that self-construal influences various aspects of consumer behavior such as ad appeals (Agrawal & Maheswaran, 2005), decision making (Mandel, 2003), product evaluation (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Gurhan-Canli & Maheswaran, 2000), product categorization (Jain, Desai, & Mao, 2007), regulatory focus (Aaker & Lee, 2001; Hamilton & Biehal, 2005; Lin, Chang, & Lin, 2012), response to messages (Aaker & Williams, 1998; Chang, 2009; Polyorat & Alden, 2005), brand extension (Ahluwalia, 2008; Ng & Houston, 2006), media acceptance (Choi & Totten, 2012), and impulsive buying (Zhang & Shrum, 2009). For example, in his study on the effect of self-construal on consumer response to anti-smoking ads, Chang (2009) showed that the anti-smoking ad describing an individual person influenced independent self-construal participants more than that did with interdependent self-construal participants. In contrast, the opposite result was found with an anti-smoking ad describing a group of people. Also, Mandel's (2003) study found that interdependent self-construal individuals admitted risks in social context (e.g., feeling embarrassed in a game competing with other people) more than independent self-construal individuals did.

The independent self-construal is likely to be fostered in the western culture where the values of independence are prevalent. In contrast, the interdependent self-construal is more likable in cultures where social context is emphasized (e.g., East Asian countries) (Aaker & Lee, 2001; Agrawal & Maheswaran, 2005; Singelis, 1994). However, research

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