

Research Article

Effects of product type and contextual cues on eliciting naive theories of popularity and exclusivity

Yael Steinhart ^{a,*}, Michael Kamins ^b, David Mazursky ^{c,d}, Avraham Noy ^e^a *Recanati Graduate School of Business, Tel-Aviv University, Israel*^b *Harriman School of Business, Stony Brook University, USA*^c *School of Business Administration, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel*^d *Bocconi University, Milan, Italy*^e *University of Haifa, Israel*

Received 15 February 2013; received in revised form 3 April 2014; accepted 8 April 2014

Available online 18 April 2014

Abstract

This research shows in a series of studies that exposing consumers to functional products evokes the naive theory of popularity, whereas exposing them to self-expressive products induces belief in the naive theory of exclusivity. The research further demonstrates that when the naive theory elicited by product type is matched by the appropriate contextual purchasing cues regarding the interest of others, it results in greater purchase intentions than when those cues are mismatched. The research specifies that the matching effect for functional products is mediated by consumers' perceptions of product quality, whereas mediation for self-expressive products occurs through consumers' self-perceptions regarding the extent to which the product conveys uniqueness. Finally, the research illustrates that an explicit signal of product quality (e.g., a favorable rating in Consumer Reports) attenuates the effect associated with the contextual cues regarding the interest of others.

© 2014 Society for Consumer Psychology. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Interest of others; Quality; Functional; Self-expressive; Unique; Naive theories of popularity and exclusivity

Introduction

Consider the following statements: “If you want to be perceived as someone who knows how to dress well, wear what everyone else is wearing; you can’t go wrong by following current trends in fashion,” and “You’ll be seen as a fashion maverick if you wear a unique dress, and be the envy of everyone at the party.” These statements represent seemingly contradictory messages about the desirability of a wearing a particular garment. The first statement implies that wearing what others wear leads to a favorable impression among interested others; in the latter

example, not wearing what others wear leads to a favorable impression among interested others. So whose advice should you take, and under what conditions?

These inferences are based on what the literature has described as naive theories. Consumers frequently use these common-sense explanations, or naive theories, as the bases for evaluating products or services (e.g., Deval, Mantel, Kardes, & Posavac, 2013; Labroo & Mukhopadhyay, 2009; Raghunathan, Naylor, & Hoyer, 2006; Yorkston, Nunes, & Matta, 2010). As in the examples above, a consumer may hold several naive beliefs that seem to contradict one another. Under certain circumstances, consumers may be driven to purchase what other consumers have purchased; but in other situations, they may be more strongly attracted to unique products offered in limited editions.

The present research focuses on naive theories related to social factors and explores two that are potentially contradictory. The first is the naive theory of popularity: the belief that a

* Corresponding author at: Marketing department Recanati Graduate School of Business, Tel-Aviv University, Ramat Aviv 69978, Israel.

E-mail addresses: ysteinhart@post.tau.ac.il (Y. Steinhart), Mkamins@marshall.usc.edu (M. Kamins), msmazur@huji.ac.il (D. Mazursky), avinoy@gsb.haifa.ac.il (A. Noy).

product is desirable when it is popular (Cialdini, 2009; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Deval et al., 2013). The second is the naive theory of exclusivity: the notion that some products are desirable when they are exclusive (Berger & Heath, 2007, 2008; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980; Steinhart, Mazursky, & Kamins, 2013).

We propose that the type of product under consideration triggers these social naive theories. We predict that when a product is functional and its performance is important in the consumer's evaluation, as opposed to expressing the consumer's identity, the naive theory of popularity is elicited. By contrast, we predict that when a product is categorized as self-expressive, and reflects upon someone's personal taste or preferences, the naive theory of exclusivity is elicited. This occurs when the product is perceived as personalized or unique, or when it enables consumers to diverge from others by explicitly showing they differ from contextual others.

We expect that when the naive theory elicited by product type matches the appropriate contextual purchasing cues (presented by the seller or the selling context), higher purchase intentions will result, compared to a mismatch. We examined the underlying mediating processes of the matching effect, by focusing on product quality perceptions for functional products; and in the case of self-expressive products, on reflective self-perceptions of uniqueness that using the products convey.

Our research framework follows that of Deval et al. (2013), who manipulated pre-exposure to written material in their first experiment designed to prime a specific naive theory. These authors show support for their contention that “marketers need to understand the importance of activating one of the competing naive theories in order to match the appeal to consumers' salient knowledge” (Deval et al., 2013, p. 1187). Although we agree with this contention, our research departs from theirs by showing that the product itself can activate a specific naive theory, in the absence of the need for any other manipulation.

Deval et al. (2013, Experiments 2–8) further reveal that product evaluations are contingent on the naive theory active at the time of judgment, and that product descriptions congruent with this naive theory result in significantly more favorable product evaluations than a mismatch. We address the product description as a contextual purchasing cue that marketers intentionally generate, and we further include the influence of cues that can be triggered by the purchase environment (i.e., interest of other consumers in the product). We follow the idea of a match or mismatch between the activated naive theory and contextual purchasing cues. In our research, however, product type triggers the activation of naive theory. The idea that a specific product type can activate a particular naive theory was also implied in the work of Berger and Heath (2007), who examined participants' preferences among a wide set of products as a function of the percentage of people who historically preferred the product. Consumers were more likely to choose products that fewer people historically preferred, particularly within product categories linked to self-identity. Although the presence or absence of naive theories related to exclusivity or popularity was not tested in Berger and Heath's (2007) research, their finding implies that products high in self-expression seemingly activate consumers' preference for exclusivity, while

functional products are more closely linked to a preference for popularity.

In a set of studies, we attempt to define the class of products that activates each naive theory. We further attempt to examine the contextual purchasing cues relating to the interest of others that are either a match or mismatch with the activated theory, examining the influence of such appeal-related cues on purchase intentions. We emphasize the mediating process of the matching effect for functional products (i.e., product quality perceptions) and for self-expressive products (i.e., uniqueness self-perceptions). Finally, we show that the presence of an explicit quality cue (e.g., a favorable rating in Consumer Reports) attenuates the process. We conducted the research across multiple products using varied approaches to imply popularity or exclusivity and ultimately to produce generalizability in our findings.

Naive theories in the context of social influence

Naive theories are defined as informal, commonsense explanations that people use in their everyday lives to make sense of their environment. Naive theories often diverge from formal, scientific explanations of what actually happens in life (Deval et al., 2013; Furnham, 1988). Because it takes minimal cognitive effort to apply and activate naive theories, consumers frequently rely on them to make inferences regarding marketing communications, products, and services (Kardes, Posavac, & Cronley, 2004). Marketers exploit these tendencies when devising communication strategies by emphasizing product characteristics that are likely to trigger naive beliefs associated with desirable consumer responses, such as information search behaviors and product evaluations (Duncan, 1990; Lynn, 1992).

Deval et al. (2013) have illustrated how commonly held naive theories may conflict with each other and how consumers' evaluations of products vary according to the inference rule triggered by prior priming (e.g., popularity versus exclusivity in a social context). Specifically, when following the naive theory of popularity, consumers may interpret the interest of many others in the product as a favorable attribute (Cialdini, 2001, 2009). This phenomenon is similar to the “bandwagon” and the “As Seen on TV” effects (Corneo & Jeanne, 1997; Hellofs & Jacobson, 1999; Powell & Prasad, 2010), which occur when consumers evaluate products favorably simply because of the number of people who have purchased or used them.

Conversely, the naive theory of exclusivity suggests that the interest of many others in a product may signal diminished product uniqueness (Lynn, 1992), leading consumers to think the product is commonplace (Hui & Bateson, 1991; Machleit, Eroglue, & Mantel, 2000). This is consistent with what Hellofs and Jacobson (1999) have termed “loss of exclusivity.”

Following the reasoning of Deval et al. (2013), activation of one of the competing naive theories guides consumers' purchase decisions by framing the context that determines how consumers value the product and ultimately the price they are willing to pay for it. As Deval et al. (2013) have shown, activation may be achieved through prior manipulation of product popularity or exclusivity cues that convey actual interest others have shown in the product. However, we maintain that exposure to the product

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/882116>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/882116>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)