

Lobster, Wine and Cigarettes: Ad Hoc Categorisations and the Emergence of Context Effects

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The impact of ad-hoc-categories on the emergence of context effects in consumer evaluations was investigated. All participants were exposed to the same four products but were induced to assign the products to different ad hoc categories, depending on experimental conditions. The categorisation tasks resulted in markedly different evaluations of the target product "wine" despite the fact that the same context stimuli were presented. We suggest that the impact of a context stimulus on a target product depends on how both are categorized. Moreover, we suggest that the categorisation processes are, at least partly, under a marketer's control. We discuss how marketers may actively affect categorization processes to increase product appeal, for example, in brand extensions and other category-based product evaluations.

Keywords: questionnaire design, questionnaire wording, context effects, consumer evaluations

Introduction

Social cognition research has highlighted the role of categorisation processes in social judgment. Categorising a person as a member of a social group, for example, allows for the application of knowledge about the group to the specific person, a process known as stereotyping (see Hamilton & Sherman 1994, for a review). Similarly, consumer research has identified many different domains of category-based inferences. For example, consumers infer specific brand attributes from the product category (e.g., Sujan 1985) or from the country of origin (Hong & Wyer 1989; Leclerc, Schmitt & Dube 1994).

In the Leclerc et al. study, cues that prompted consumers to categorise a brand as French resulted in higher hedonic product appeals, suggesting that consumers drew on their general expectations of French culture when evaluating French products. Most prominently, categorisation processes have featured in research on brand extensions. Assigning a new product to a brand allows for the transfer of established brand beliefs to the new product (e.g., Boush & Loken 1991; Wänke, Bless & Schwarz 1998). In general, features of the exemplar (i.e., target person or product) are inferred from the superordinate category of which the exemplar is a member, resulting in an *assimilation* of the exemplar evaluation to the evaluation of its category.

Categorisation research has focused on categories for which individuals are likely to have well-formed mental representations, such as stereotypes or brand images. Moreover, the categorisation of exemplars has typically been manipulated by varying the actual features of the exemplar in order to vary typicality, extremity or generally the overlap between features of the exemplar and the category. For example, when Boush and Loken (1991) tested how the typicality of a brand extension affected its evaluation, they used *different* products as typical and atypical extensions (e.g., canned fruit vs. toothpaste as extensions of a soup brand).

If categorisation were merely a function of the nature of the products, marketers have little influence on the outcome of category-based judgments. However, categorisation research in cognitive psychology indicates that categorisations are not necessarily based on feature overlap. For example, objects as diverse as "children," "money," and "photo-albums" may be assigned to the same category, in this case the ad-hoc-category of "things to take out of the house in the case of

fire" (Barsalou 1983). Such ad-hoc-categories are constructed in the service of a current task.

The present study extends categorisation research in social cognition and marketing by addressing the role of ad-hoc-categories in the emergence of context effects in evaluative judgment. Specifically, we exposed all participants to the same four consumer products, namely "lobster," "wine," "cigarettes," and "tv-guide." Note that this procedure deviates from the typical procedures employed in categorisation research by presenting the same stimuli in all conditions, without varying the stimuli's features. To manipulate the categorisation of these stimuli, we presented participants with one of two tasks: Some participants were asked to identify the products that belong to the category food, whereas others were asked to identify the products that have to be sold within a short time period. The correct answer to the first task is "wine and lobster," resulting in an ad-hoc-category that includes these products and a remaining ad-hoc-category that includes "cigarettes and tv-guides." The correct answer to the second task is "lobster and tv-guides," resulting in an ad-hoc-category that includes these products and a remaining category that includes "wine and cigarettes." Following the categorisation task, participants rated the target "wine" along several dimensions, such as "elegant," "unhealthy," and so on. If such ad-hoc categorisations have an impact on subsequent product judgments, marketers could develop strategies for eliciting ad-hoc categorizations and could better influence category-derived judgments.

So far we have only addressed assimilation as the result of categorisation processes. However, exemplars that are not assigned to the category may elicit contrast effects. For example, elsewhere we showed that a new car model was evaluated as less sportscar-like when it came from a sportscar brand but was perceived as discontinuing the previous line of sportcars when no information about its brand was given (Wänke, Bless & Schwarz 1998). We argue that the previous models of the brand served as a standard of comparison and made the new model look less sportscar-like (see Schwarz & Bless 1992, for a more detailed discussion of the standard of comparison).

For the present study, we predicted that participants would evaluate the target "wine" more favorably following the ad-hoc categorisation with lobster than after assigning lobster and wine to different categories. Specifically, when wine and the up-market product lobster are assigned to the same ad-hoc-category, within-category assimilation should enhance the positive features of wine. Moreover, the remaining low-market products cigarettes and tv-guide may serve as standards of comparison, further enhancing the evaluation of wine. On the other hand, assigning lobster and tv-guides to an ad-hoc-category renders the up-market product lobster available as a standard of comparison while grouping wine with the low-scale product cigarettes. Within-category assimilation and between-category contrast should result in a less favorable evaluation of wine under these conditions.

Support for these predictions would indicate that the impact of contextual stimuli does not depend on the features of these stimuli per se. In both conditions, the same stimuli are presented and the design isolates the role of categorisation processes by inducing participants to assign the stimuli to different ad-hoc-categories.

Method

Forty four undergraduates of the University of Illinois participated for course credit and were randomly assigned to one of three conditions of an alleged study of consumer judgment.

All tasks were presented on a personal computer and participants recorded their answers in boxes on an answer sheet. After some practice tasks, the following items were simultaneously presented on the computer screen: "wine", "lobster", "cigarettes", "tv-guide". To manipulate the categorisation of these products, participants of the two experimental conditions were asked to either select the products that are food items (correct answer: lobster and wine), or the products have to be sold in relatively short period of time (correct answer: lobster and tv-guide). When participants thought to have the correct answer, they pressed the space-bar to access the next screen, which informed them in which box on the answer sheet they should record their response. This ensured that they needed to hold the products in memory, at least briefly.

Following this task, participants rated the target product "wine" on the following five dimensions: elegant, unhealthy, a drug, cheap, something for a special occasion (1 = does not apply; 9 = applies very much). Control group participants made these ratings without having been exposed to the context stimuli.

Results and Discussion

A 3 (same category, different category, control group) x 5 (judgment dimension)- factorial MANOVA, with categorization as a between-subject-factor and dimension as a within-subject factor, revealed the predicted effect of the categorization task, $F(2,41) = 3.11$, $p < .05$. Because the repeated measurement factor (dimensions) did not interact with the between subjects factor, $F < 1$, we computed a compound score (9 = positive).

As expected, wine was evaluated more positively when assigned to an ad hoc category with lobster ($M = 6.5$) rather than with cigarettes ($M = 5.5$), $t(41) = -2.49$, $p < .02$. The control group fell in between these extremes ($M = 6.1$) but did not differ reliably from either of the experimental conditions.¹

These findings have two important implications. First, they demonstrate that the direction of context effects does not depend on the nature of the contextual stimuli *per se*. In the present study, the same stimuli were presented in both experimental conditions, yet their impact differed markedly as a function of how the stimuli were categorised. Second, these findings also demonstrate that the categorisation of a stimulus is not solely determined by its features *per se*. Although the overlap between the features of stimuli and a superordinate category will usually determine their categorisation (as a large body of literature demonstrates; see Schwarz & Bless 1992), different categorisations can be evoked by ad-hoc-tasks while holding the features of the stimuli constant (see Barsalou 1983).

This flexibility of contextual influences holds interesting implications for an applied context. Those concerned with managing a target impression, for example, the perceived quality of a

¹ The control group differed from both experimental groups in the accessible information used for the representation of the target and standard of comparison. This information was constant in the two experimental conditions but still significant differences emerged, emphasizing the important impact of categorization over and above the accessibility of information.

consumer product, or a politician's trustworthiness, 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 our control. Our results show, however, that whether a particular stimulus (lobster) exerted negative or positive influence depended on its categorisation. Moreover, the categorisation can be externally influenced. By affecting the categorisation 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). Our research demonstrates that categorisation processes can be manipulated independent of the perceived similarity. Thus, marketers are not merely a victim of product features but may actively determine product categorisations.

The present study lays the ground for thinking about possible applications of categorization effects in marketing, by shelving, pairing products in promotions, advertising strategies and others. For example, standard-featured models may often suffer harm when compared to the top-of-the-line-models. Compared to a luxury model the standard model seems less attractive (contrast). We suggest that if consumers can be provoked to assign the standard-featured and the top-of-the-line model to the same category, for example the same brand, the same country-of-origin, or the "kind of products sold in this specific outlet", the top-of-the-line-model should increase the appeal of the more moderate model. It seems relatively easy to design communications that elicit such categorisations. Elsewhere we have demonstrated how marketers may use subtle manipulations such as the name of the models in order to affect categorisation and context use (Wänke *et al.*, 1998).

Theoretically, assimilation effects are expected when several stimuli are assigned to the same category, whereas contrast effects are expected when they are assigned to different categories (see Schwarz & Bless 1992, for a review). The present design does not allow us to estimate the separate contributions of within-category assimilation and between-category contrast, an issue that awaits further research. Our findings highlight, however, that context is not destiny: while

we may often be unable to change the context in which a product or person is evaluated, we may be able to influence how the given contextual stimuli are used. So next time someone tastes your wine, make sure you ask the right question first.

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