INDIAN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT KOZHIKODE

Working Paper

IIMK/WPS/443/MM/2021/05

March 2021

Brand Representation Over Time

Pronobesh Banerjee[1]

[1]Assistant Professor, Marketing Management, Indian Institute of Management, Kozhikode, IIMK Campus PO, Kunnamangalam, Kozhikode, Kerala, India; Email - pbanerjee@iimk.ac.in, Phone Number - 0495-2809239

Abstract

Previous research shows that situational variables influence the accessibility of brand knowledge. For example, individuals with interdependent self-construal are more likely to associate with an exemplar than a prototype of a brand. Likewise, individuals with independent self-construal more likely associate with the prototype than the exemplar. In addition, field dependents have greater accessibility to exemplar than prototype associations. Likewise, independents have greater accessibility to prototype than exemplar associations. This research shows how another situation variable, temporal construal, moderates the accessibility of exemplar and prototype associations of a brand.

There are two representations of an object or event, as identified by the theories of categorization (Rosch, 1975), concept formation (Medin and Smith 1984), and action identification (Vallacher and Wegner 1987): concrete and abstract. The concrete representation of an event, e.g. "playing ball outside," can take an abstract form, e.g. "having fun." Construal level theory (Trope and Liberman 2010) states that representations in abstract or concrete terms have a reference point – the self. In other words, events, memories, and objects take abstract terms when they are distant from the self, while they take concrete form if they are closer. Moreover, research shows that psychological distance from the self and its representations are influenced by temporal, spatial and social factors (Trope and Liberman 2010).

The role of the self in a consumer's decision making is pervasive. Temporal construal theory is concerned with the impact of an event's distance on the self (Trope and Liberman 2003), and a current stream of research has identified it as having an influence on consumer judgment and evaluation (Kim, Park and Wyer Jr. 2009; Kim, Rao and Lee 2009; Laran 2010). Consumers frequently shift between consumption situations that relate to the present and the future. Given how ubiquitous our decisions are in time, we cannot limit research to merely consumer judgment and evaluation.

In this paper, I try to find out whether the temporal distance of the self, influences the representation of a brand. Consumers always associate themselves with brands. After all, we could go to either Walmart or JCPenney for the same product. When we want to buy cereal, we could buy an in-store (e.g., Great Value) or a national brand (e.g. Cheerios). Research shows that how consumers think about a brand has implications not only for understanding customer-based brand equity, but also for brand categorization and brand extension evaluation (Keller, 2002; Ng and Houston 2006).

A brand is essentially represented in two forms: exemplar, which refers to the products that the brand is known for, and prototype, which refers to the beliefs and attributes associated with the brand (Mao and Krishnan 2006; Ng and Houston 2006). For example, Johnson & Johnson can be represented by its exemplars, e.g., baby soap or baby shampoo, and its prototypes, e.g., soft or gentle.

In this reseach, I will show that individuals with near temporal construal use more exemplars than prototypes to represent a brand, while individuals with distant temporal construal use more prototypes than exemplars to represent a brand.

TEMPORAL CONSTRUAL AND BRAND THOUGHTS

Temporal Construal, Self-Representation, and Brand Association Accessibility

Temporal construal theory states that a person's representation of an event depends on whether it is expected to occur in the distant or near future (Trope and Liberman 2003). When an event is temporally distant, it is conveyed by more abstract, decontextualized, and general terms. For example, going to the gym is described as "staying fit." However, when an event is temporally near, the description has more concrete, contextual, and incidental aspects. Going to the gym is now described as "working out on the treadmill," "lifting weights," and "cycling" (Liberman and Trope 1998; Trope and Liberman 2003).

The representation of an event over time influences the way consumers represent themselves in those situations. Waslak, Nussbaun, Liberman, and Trope (2008) demonstrated that concrete, unrelated, and contextual aspects of the self, e.g. "I am an African American working for GE in New York" or "I am a minority fighting for my rights," are used to characterize the self from a temporally near perspective. In contrast, a temporally distant self-representation takes an abstract form that portrays the self's gist, e.g. "I am a Black woman."

Ng and Houston (2006) showed that the representation of brands is similar to the representation of the self. Tuan (1980) argued that "our fragile sense of the self needs support, and this we get by having and possessing things because to a large degree we are what we possess" (p. 472). How consumers portray their identity through the goods they possess is referred to as the "extended self" (Belk, 1987). These goods or brands are an extension of one's definition of his or her self. Therefore, I expect that the representation of a brand, in a particular consumption period, will be similar to the representation of the self in the near and distant future.

As mentioned earlier, brands are represented by concrete and abstract associations (Ng and Houston 2006). Abstract representations have a general notion, or prototype, of what the brand stands for, e.g., electrical, stylish, or innovative for the brand Sony, while concrete representations refer to the products, or exemplars, that are associated with the brand, e.g., Sony stereo or Sony TV. As the representation of the self is more abstract in the distant future, so will the representation of the brand. Consequently, the brand will rather be described by its prototypes. However, because more concrete descriptions are used to portray the self in the near future, the brand will be described by its exemplars, e.g., a Sony TV. Based on this theoretical background, this study proposes the following hypotheses (see Figure 1 for illustration):

H_{1a}: Individuals with distant temporal construal will use more prototypes than exemplars.

H_{1b}: Individuals with near temporal construal will use more exemplars than prototypes.

H_{2a}: Individuals will list more exemplars with near than with distant temporal construal.

H$_{2b}$:   Individuals will list more prototypes with distant than with near temporal construal.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Studies 1 and 2 will show whether the use of prototypes and exemplars in the representation of a brand changes with a different temporal construal of a consumer. In Study 1, the temporal construal of the participants is measured as an individual difference factor because the representation of events across low- and high-level construal is similar to the representation of an event in the near and distant future, respectively (Trope, Liberman and Waslak 2007). Meanwhile, in Study 2, the construal level is the temporal distance in order to rule out any contradicting results associated with the measurement of construal levels (Kim and John 2008).

STUDY 1

Method: Design, Participants, Variables, and Procedure

In this study, a simple two-group design was used. Participants consisted of 81 students (37% female, 63% male) at a large U.S. university, ranging in age from 17 to 35.

Experimental Stimuli: Pre-tests extracted brands with an equal number of exemplars and prototypes. The choice of these brands rules out the possibility that different numbers of exemplars and prototypes could influence the representation of a brand. After the tests, Sony and Nike were chosen as the experimental brands. They have as many exemplars as they have prototypes that are well-established (Ng and Houston 2006, 2010).

Independent variables. The temporal construal of the participants, i.e. near or distant future.

Dependent variables. The brand related thoughts listed by the participants. Two independent judges coded the thoughts. They agreed 96% of the time. Differences were resolved through discussions. Thoughts were coded into either exemplars or prototypes of a brand. Thoughts referring to specific products of the brand were coded as exemplars, e.g. Sony PlayStation or Nike shoes, while general descriptions, e.g. Sony represents high quality and Nike means athletic, were coded as prototypes.

Material and procedure. Participants received a pack of materials with an instruction sheet and a survey. They were told that the study dealt with consumers' thoughts about brands and were asked to perform two unrelated tasks. First, participants completed a free association task. They were presented with the two brands (one at a time) and were asked to write down their thoughts as they considered the each brand. The order of the brand presentation was randomized. Next, the construal level was measured using Vallacher and Wegner's (1987) Behavior Identification Form (BIF). Participants were presented with two alternative descriptions for 25 different target behaviors. For example, "reading" was described in two ways: how the behavior was performed, e.g. following the lines of print, or why the behavior was performed, e.g. gaining knowledge. Participants chose the description that they believed to be more appropriate for them. The BIF score consisted of the number of abstract descriptions selected by a respondent across 25 behaviors. Following Kim and John (2008), a median split was used to identify two levels of the construal. Individuals scoring 14 or higher were classified as individuals with high construal levels, and the others were classified as individuals with low construal levels. Participants reported how familiar they were with Sony and Nike and how much they liked them on a seven-point scale, completed classification questions, were thanked and debriefed.

Results

The participants were very familiar with the brands (familiar r c

M_{Nike} = 6.77 and M_{Sony} a   h   r   ch   a   ra   a   a

M_{Nike} = 5.84 and M_{Sony} = 5.81). See table 1 for the cell means.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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To test hypotheses 1a and 1b, the number of exemplars and prototypes that were identified in the free association task were analyzed. Consistent with hypotheses 1a and 1b, a MANOVA analysis showed a significant effect of the construal level (Sony: $F(2, 78) = 35.98$, $p < .01$; Nike: $F(2, 78) = 36.95$, $p < .01$). Planned contrasts revealed that for Sony, participants with a low-level construal listed significantly more exemplars than prototypes of the brand ($M_{Exemplar}$ = 3.94 (2.02) versus $M_{Prototype}$ = 1.28 (1.27), $t(37) = 5.95$, $p < .01$), while participants with a high-level construal listed significantly more prototypes than exemplars of the brand ($M_{Prototype}$ = 3.81 (1.54) versus $M_{Exemplar}$ = 1.81 (1.51), $t(42) = 5.35$, $p < .01$). The results for Nike mirrored this pattern.

Consistent with hypothesis 2a, participants with a low-level construal listed more exemplars than consumers with a high-level construal (Sony: $t(79) = 5.40$, $p < .01$, Nike: $t(79) = 6.41$, $p < .01$). In contrast, consumers with a high-level construal listed more prototypes than those with a low-level construal (Sony: $t(79) = 7.95$, p < .01; Nike: $t(79) = 7.18$, p < .01). These results validate hypotheses 1 and 2.

Method: Design, Participants, Variables, and Procedures

Again, a simple two-group design was used. Participants consisted of 69 students (32% female, 68% male) at a large U.S. university, ranging in age from 18 to 28.

Independent Variable. The temporal construal, which is manipulated.

Dependent Variable. Listed brand thoughts, as coded in Study 1 (with an inter-rater-reliability of 98%).

Materials and procedure. This study used Sony, a brand that is associated with a large number of product categories, and Cheerios, a brand that is associated with only one product category. Sony was chosen to replicate the results of study 1, where the construal level was measured. Cheerios was chosen to test the stability of the findings in a narrow brand while the construal level is primed by temporal distance.

Participants received a two-part booklet. The first part contained an adaptation of Liberman and Trope's (1998) temporal construal prime. Participants were told to think about taking a trip the next day (in the near temporal prime) or in six months (in the distant temporal prime) and write down their thoughts. The results of a pre-test revealed that the manipulation was successful. Finally, participants reported how familiar they were to Sony and Cheerios and how much they liked the brands. They completed classification questions, were thanked and debriefed.

Results

There was no difference in favorability and familiarity of the brands across the conditions (all F's < 1). See table 2 for the cell means.

Insert Table 2 about here

Consistent with hypotheses 1a and 1b, the MANOVA analysis showed a significant effect of the temporal construal (Sony: $F(2, 66) = 17.75$, $p < .001$). For Sony, participants in the near temporal condition listed significantly more brand exemplars than prototypes ($M_{Exemplar} = 2.88$ (1.83) versus $M_{Prototype} = 1.83$ (1.44), $t(35) = 2.17$, $p < .05$), while participants in the distant temporal condition listed significantly more brand prototypes than exemplars ($M_{Prototype} = 3.84$ (1.80) versus $M_{Exemplar} = 1.63$ (1.38), $t(32) = 5.03$, $p < .01$). The same results were observed for Cheerios.

Consistent with hypotheses 2a and 2b, the number of prototypes and exemplars varied with different temporal construal. Individuals listed more exemplars in the near temporal construal than in the distant temporal construal (Sony: $t(79) = 7.95$, $p < .01$; Cheerios: $t(67) = 2.12$, $p < .05$), thereby supporting hypothesis 2b. At the same time, individuals listed more prototypes in the distant temporal construal than in the near temporal construal (Sony: $t(79) = 6.44$, $p < .01$; Cheerios: $t(67) = 6.49$, $p < .01$), thereby supporting hypothesis 2a. Thus, the results confirm hypotheses 1 and 2.

Conclusion

The results of studies 1and 2 show that consumers with distant temporal construal use more prototypes than exemplars to represent a brand. In contrast, consumers with near temporal construal use more exemplars than prototypes to represent the same brand. Therefore, the representation of a brand in prototypes and exemplars varies with an individual's temporal construal. Moreover, the findings are stable across different brand categories, whether narrow or broad.

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Tables

Table 1
CONSTRUAL LEVEL (MEASURED) AND BRAND THOUGHTS – STUDY 1A

Brands	Construal level	Thoughts		t-Test
		Exemplar Means (SD)	Prototype Means (SD)	
Sony	Low-level (n=38)	3.94 (2.02)	1.28 (1.27)	t(37) = 5.95**
	High-level (n=43)	1.81 (1.51)	3.81 (1.54)	t(42) = 5.35**
Nike	Low-level (n=38)	3.86 (1.83)	1.76 (1.07)	t(37) = 5.25**
	High-level (n=43)	1.55 (1.40)	4.18 (1.81)	t(42) = 6.97**

**$p < .01$

Table 2
TEMPORAL CONSTRUAL AND BRAND THOUGHTS – STUDY 1B

Brands	Temporal Construal	Thoughts		t-Test
		Exemplar Means (SD)	Prototype Means (SD)	
Sony	Near (n=36)	2.88 (1.83)	1.83 (1.44)	t(35) = 2.17*
	Distant (n=33)	1.63 (1.38)	3.84 (1.80)	t(32) = 5.03**
Cheerios	Near (n=36)	2.25 (1.82)	1.50 (.91)	t(35) = 2.24*
	Distant (n=33)	1.42 (1.17)	3.69 (1.79)	t(32) = 5.26**

**$p < .01$
*$p < .05$

Figures

Figure 1
HYPOTHESIZED INTERACTION OF TEMPORAL CONSTRUAL AND
BRAND REPRESENTATION
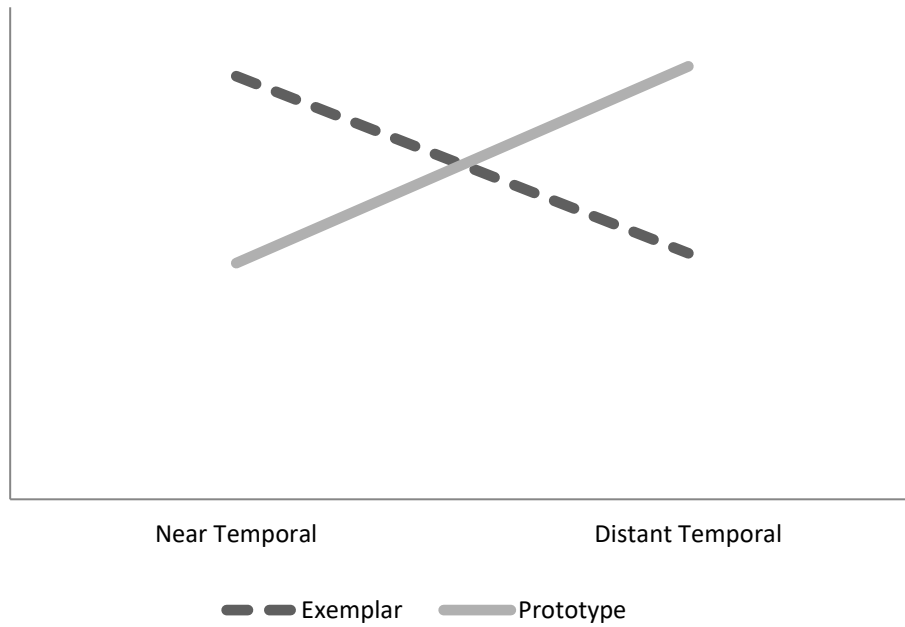
Research Office

Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode

IIMK Campus P. O.,

Kozhikode, Kerala, India,

PIN - 673 570

Phone: +91-495-2809238

Email: research@iimk.ac.in

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