Heuristic Cues and Perceived Product Value: Effects of Priming, Team-Brand Cue and Product Category

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Sport marketing literature has well documented the positive function of fan-team relationship (e.g., team identification, image congruence) on team-licensed product purchase behavior (e.g., Kwak & Kang, 2009; Kwon & Trail, 2003; Kwon, Trail & James, 2007). Although it is somewhat obvious that highly identified fans would be more likely to purchase team-licensed merchandise than less identified fans, very little is known about the causal influence of other heuristic cues (e.g., priming, brand, product category, etc.) that might also drive purchase decisions. The purpose of the current study is to investigate the psychological processes that underlie product evaluations. Using an experimental approach, we investigate the effects of message priming, team-brand cue, and product category on multi-dimensional product value (functional, hedonic, and social). Drawing theoretical frameworks from advertising and marketing literature, the study hypothesizes that product value would depend upon various product-related heuristic cues– above and beyond the fan-team relationship variable (i.e., team identification). Findings from experiment highlight the predictive function of product-related heuristic information on various value dimensions.

Priming. Researchers using the priming paradigm have shown that people’s interpretation of information preceding the marketing stimuli (e.g., advertisement) can impact evaluation of the advertised brand (e.g., Yi, 1990). An exposure to contextual factors can prime or activate certain product attributes in consumers’ mind in processing advertisements. Therefore, the evaluation of the advertised product would depend upon the message valence preceding the advertisement. For instance, if an individual receives a positive message about an object that s/he cares about, positive feelings evoked from the message would enhance his/her motivation and ability to process persuasive messages. Consistent with the priming literature, it is hypothesized that

H1: Participants primed with a positive publicity about the team would evaluate the advertised product more favorably than participants primed with a negative article.

Team-Brand Cue. Consumer behavior scholars have long been interested in the impact of brand on product evaluations and purchase decision (e.g., Aaker & Keller, 1990). Previous marketing research has shown that brand can signal quality and value of the given product (e.g., Dodds, Monroe, & Grewal, 1991; Zeithaml, 1988). Empirical findings suggest that the presence of brand name enhances quality perception of the product which subsequently leads to purchase decision. Thus, we believe that the presence of team-brand cue (i.e., team’s logo) would have a positive impact on how sport consumers evaluate the product on a multi-dimensional scale.

H2: Participants exposed to an advertisement containing the team-brand cue would evaluate the advertised product more favorably than participants exposed to an advertisement without the team-brand cue.

Product Category. Finally, product category (functional vs. hedonic) is employed in the present study as another extrinsic product-related cue. It has been well documented that products differ in satisfying consumers’ needs (Bhat & Reddy, 1998; Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986). For instance, some products (e.g., utilitarian goods) may satisfy consumers’ functional needs while some products (e.g., symbolic goods) may satisfy hedonic and social needs. In light of varying product-related needs, the current study explores the effect of product category (utilitarian vs. hedonic) on product evaluations. We hypothesize that symbolic product would generally receive more favorable evaluations on various dimensions of consumption value than utilitarian product.

H3: Participants exposed to symbolic product would evaluate the advertised product more favorably than participants exposed to utilitarian product.
A 2 (message priming: positive/negative) × 2 (team-brand cue: present/absent) × 2 (product category: functional/symbolic) between-subjects design was employed in the current study. Two fictitious publicity articles (positive valence and negative valence) about the team were created to induce message priming effect. Four print advertisements were designed to manipulate team-brand cue (team logo present vs. absent) and product category (pen vs. apparel). Each participant was randomly exposed to one of two articles and viewed one of four treatment advertisements. After viewing the print advertisement, participants completed the questionnaires assessing three dimensions of product value (functional, hedonic, and social). All multi-item measures (i.e., team identification, product value scale) were adapted from existing literature (e.g., Sweeney & Soutar, 2001).

Undergraduate students (N = 172) at a large Midwestern university participated in the current study. A multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) controlling for team identification was employed to test the proposed hypotheses. The results showed that message priming has a positive main effect on utilitarian dimension of product value [F(1, 172) = 3.94, p < .05]. Team-brand cue had positive main effects on all three product value dimensions: Utilitarian [F(1, 172) = 5.81, p < .05]; Hedonic [F(1, 172) = 6.03, p < .05]; Social [F(1, 172) = 4.18, p < .05]. Product category had significant main effects on Hedonic [F(1, 172) = 6.22, p < .05] and Social [F(1, 172) = 7.36, p < .05] value. Lastly, team identification (covariate) had a significant effect on increasing Hedonic [F(1, 172) = 4.27, p < .05] value of the product. Two-way interaction effects were found between product category and team-brand cue on Hedonic [F(3, 172) = 3.91, p < .05] and Social [F(3, 172) = 5.65, p < .05] value dimensions.

The findings of this study provide several theoretical and practical implications. First, the current study sheds new insight on the role of extrinsic product-related cues on product evaluations. By employing a multi-dimensional approach (cf. Sweeney & Soutar, 2001), the findings suggest that certain heuristic cues may tap into different value dimensions of the product. For instance, the presence of team-brand cue enhances product value on all value dimensions, while priming with positive message had a significant effect on utilitarian dimension only. Second, the predictive role of heuristic cues was still significant even after controlling for team identification level. Findings extend the previous research that product-related cues could be powerful motivators of purchase decisions. Managers may find the findings of the current study useful in designing and marketing a product in spectator sport consumption setting.