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On the effects of product name on product evaluation: An individual difference perspective

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High and low self-monitoring individuals sampled and evaluated energy drinks that had either an image-oriented name or a name that simply described the product. High self-monitors evaluated the drinks more favorably when they had the image-oriented name than when they had the self-descriptive name. In contrast, low self-monitors preferred the drinks more when they had the self-descriptive name than when they had the image-oriented name.

Keywords: Self-monitoring; Product perception; Product name.

Research in consumer psychology indicates that there may be stable individual differences in the strategies individuals adopt to evaluate everyday consumer products. In particular, the social psychological construct of self-monitoring (Snyder, 1987) appears to reliably differentiate individuals who tend to evaluate products on the basis of their image-enhancing potentials from individuals who tend to rely more on the actual performance of the products (cf. DeBono, 2000, 2006).

High self-monitors, as identified by their relatively high scores on the self-monitoring scale (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986), typically try to be the type of person called for in each situation in which they find themselves. They tend to be concerned about the image they project to others in social situations and they are generally adept at adjusting their self-presentations to fit differing social and interpersonal considerations of appropriateness.

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As a result, high self-monitors often display marked situation-to-situation shifts in the images they project to others (Snyder, 1987).

Low self-monitors, in contrast, characteristically do not attempt to mold their behaviors to fit situation-specific considerations of appropriateness. Rather, they appear more concerned with maintaining a relatively high degree of congruence between their attitudes and their actions. As a consequence, low self-monitors often display substantial correspondence between their private attitudes and public behaviors (Snyder, 1987).

One arena in which these differing interpersonal orientations manifest themselves is in the means by which high and low self-monitors assess everyday consumer products. Research has demonstrated rather consistently that high self-monitors evaluate products as a function of the extent to which a product has the capability of projecting a desirable image of the consumer. In contrast, low self-monitors tend to judge products on the degree to which those products perform as products of that type should (DeBono, 2000, 2006; see also Aaker, 1999; Graeff, 1996). For example, DeBono and Rubin (1995) had high and low self-monitors evaluate a sample of cheese that they believed was either a product of an image-enhancing country (France) or of a less-image-enhancing place (Kansas). For some, the cheese was pleasant tasting and for others it was less so. Results indicated that high self-monitors judged the quality of the cheese based primarily on the country of origin, evaluating the French cheese more favorably than the Kansas cheese regardless of its actual taste. Low self-monitors' evaluations, however, were driven by the taste of the cheese itself. They evaluated the pleasant-tasting cheese more favorably than the less-pleasant-tasting cheese irrespective of its place of origin.

Similarly, DeBono, Leavitt, and Backus (2003, Study 2) asked participants to sample and rate either a pleasant-smelling or less-pleasant-smelling perfume (or cologne) that was presented to them in either a very attractive bottle or a less-attractive bottle. Similar to DeBono and Rubin (1995), they found that high self-monitors judged the scents that came from the attractive containers as more desirable than the scents that came from the less-attractive containers, regardless of the actual scent, whereas low self-monitors rated the pleasant-smelling scents more highly than the less-pleasant-smelling scents regardless of the bottle from which they came. In a related vein, DeBono and Packer (1991, Study 1) presented high and low self-monitors with either image-oriented or quality-focused advertisements for a number of products. When the participants were later asked to sample and then evaluate these products, the results demonstrated that high self-monitors rated the quality of the products higher when first exposed to the image-oriented ads, but that low self-monitors tended to rate product quality higher after viewing the more quality-focused ads (see also DeBono, 2000, for related studies).

This tendency for low self-monitors to judge products based on their actual performance and for high self-monitors to judge products based on their image-enhancing potential is also reflected in their reactions to different advertising strategies (DeBono 2006). In particular, whereas high self-monitors respond more positively to ads that highlight the image associated with a product, low self-monitors resonate more strongly to ads that relay information about what the product is and what it does. For example, Snyder and DeBono (1985, Study 1) found that low self-monitors tended to react more positively to an advertisement for a flavored coffee that simply listed the product's ingredients than they did to an ad that associated the product with a pleasant setting (the reverse tendency was evident for high self-monitors). Similarly, Yates and Noyes (2007) presented high and low self-monitors with a Web ad for a car that was either image oriented or that provided information about the product itself, and found that low self-monitors were more satisfied with the information-based ad and high self-monitors were more satisfied with the image appeal. Moreover, when Shavitt, Lowrey, and Han (1992, Study 3) asked high and low self-monitors to write their own ad for a pair of sunglasses (i.e., an ad that they would find appealing), results indicated that low self-monitors generated copy that focused on the utilitarian aspects of the product whereas high self-monitors produced copy that focused more on the social aspects of the product.

In the current study we attempt to expand on and extend these findings by investigating whether the *name* of a product differentially affects high and low self-monitors' evaluations of that product. Research on product perception has demonstrated that on a wide variety of products ranging from beer (Jacoby, Olson, & Haddock, 1971) to calculators (Dodds, Monroe, & Grewal, 1991) a product's name can and does have an impact on product-related judgments and evaluations (see also Biswas & Sherrell, 1993; Isen, Labroo, & Durlach, 2004). Leclerc, Schmitt, and Dubé (1993), for example, found that participants thought more highly of a fragrance and a nail polish when the products' names were given a French (as opposed to English) pronunciation, and Isen et al. (2004) found that participants responded more positively to a sample of iced tea when they believed it was a reputable brand versus when they were not given the product's name.

Of interest, some product names are clearly intended to convey to the consumer information about the image that the manufacturers would like the product to project, whereas other product names are focused more on telling the consumer something about what the product is and what the product does. A walk through any grocery or department store will quickly illustrate that some product names are designed to evoke desirable images, e.g., *Zest* soap and *White Diamonds* perfume, but that other product names are intended to describe the product itself and inform the consumer about the purpose or function of the product, e.g., *Shredded Wheat* cereal and

Scrubbing Bubbles cleaner. In light of the previous research on the different strategies that high and low self-monitors employ to evaluate products, as well as their differential responses to image-based and informational advertisements, we had reason to believe that different product names might very well have predictably different effects on the product evaluations of high and low self-monitors. In particular, given high self-monitors' tendencies to resonate to product attributes that highlight the image-enhancing potential of a product and low self-monitors' tendencies to stress product functionality and performance, we suspected that high self-monitors might evaluate a product more favorably if its name evokes a desirable image than if the name simply describes the product, whereas low self-monitors might evaluate that same product more favorably when its name speaks to the use and function of the product than if it alludes to some kind of pleasing image. We investigated these possibilities by asking high and low self-monitors to sample two energy drinks, one of which had an image-oriented name, *Fast Track*, and one of which described the product itself, *Energy Drink Enhancer*. We expected that high self-monitors would evaluate the energy drink with the image-oriented name more positively than when it had the self-descriptive name, but that low self-monitors would evaluate the drink more positively when its name described the product itself.

METHOD

Pre-test

To assure that our product names were indeed differentially perceived as image-based and self-descriptive we asked 41 Union College undergraduates to rate on a 1–7 scale (1 = definitely disagree, 7 = definitely agree) first the extent to which they believed that each name was “designed to provoke a desirable image” and then the extent to which the name was “designed to tell what the product is or does.” In addition we asked all participants to complete the self-monitoring scale (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). Results indicated that participants believed that the name *Fast Track* was more designed to provoke a desirable image ($M = 6.17$) than it was designed to tell what the product is or does ($M = 3.02$), $t(40) = 13.5$, $p < .001$. Moreover when we computed, for each participant, the difference between their responses to the “provokes a desirable image” question and the “... designed to tell what the product is or does” question, we found that participants' self-monitoring scores were not significantly related to these difference scores, $r(39) = .19$, $p > .05$, suggesting that individuals higher and lower in self-monitoring perceived that the name *Fast Track* was more designed to provoke a desirable image than to describe the product's function to the same extent. Participants also indicated that the name

Energy Drink Enhancer was more designed to relay information about the product ($M=6.54$) than to provoke a desirable image ($M=4.1$), $t(40)=8.23, p<.001$. Again, self-monitoring scores were not reliably related to the difference scores on these questions, $r(39)=.21, p>.05$.

In addition participants perceived that the name *Fast Track* was more designed to provoke a desirable image than was the name *Energy Drink Enhancer*, $t(40)=6.54, p<.001$ (with no significant difference in these differential perceptions as a function of self-monitoring, $r(39)=.23, p>.05$) and that the name *Energy Drink Enhancer* was more designed to tell consumers about the product's function than was the name *Fast Track*, $t(40)=12.86, p<.001$ —with no reliable difference in these difference scores among individuals higher and lower in self-monitoring, $r(39)=.12, p>.05$.

MAIN STUDY

Participants

A total of 189 Union College undergraduates participated for either monetary compensation or course credit.

Procedure

When participants arrived at the lab (in groups of one to four), the researcher informed them that this study concerned differences in the taste preferences of college students in the northeast section of the United States versus students who attend colleges on the U.S.'s west coast. In particular, participants were told the study would involve their reactions to energy drinks not typically marketed in those regions of the country, and that, as part of the study, they would sample and evaluate two such energy drinks.

After obtaining informed consent, the researcher presented participants with two energy drinks, one of which had an orange flavor and one of which had a lemon flavor (in reality, both drinks were versions of the *Power Edge* brand). We led participants to believe that one drink was called *Energy Drink Enhancer* and that the other drink was called *Fast Track*. We counterbalanced product name with product flavor, and also counterbalanced order of presentation with respect to both product name and product flavor.

Immediately after sampling each drink, participants completed a 5-item, Likert-type (1 = definitely disagree 7 = definitely agree) evaluation questionnaire (e.g., "I liked the taste of this drink" "Compared to other energy drinks I've had, I like this one better."). Upon completing the evaluation questionnaire for the second drink, participants were given an additional five-item questionnaire that asked them to directly compare the two drinks (e.g., "Which product did you like better?" "Which product tasted better?").

Following this, we asked all participants to complete the 18-item Self-Monitoring inventory (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). We then debriefed participants and thanked them for their time.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Product ratings

As responses on the five-item evaluation questionnaire were internally consistent for both product names (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$ for *Fast Track* and $.90$ for *Energy Drink Enhancer*), we computed an overall evaluation score for each drink name by summing responses on the evaluation questionnaires. To assess relative preferences we then subtracted the composite scores for *Energy Drink Enhancer* from the composite scores for *Fast Track*. Higher scores on this resulting index indicate a relatively higher preference for *Fast Track*. To evaluate our hypothesis we regressed the relative preference scores on self-monitoring scores and found that self-monitoring scores significantly predicted relative evaluation scores, $t(188) = 2.68$, $\beta = .193$, $p = .008$, $R^2 = .032$. As expected, individuals higher in self-monitoring showed a stronger preference for the drinks when they were labeled *Fast Track* than when they were labeled *Energy Drink Enhancer*.

Alternatively, if individuals are classified as high and low self-monitors using the cut-offs recommended by Gangestad and Snyder (1985), individuals with scores ≥ 11 on the Self-Monitoring scale are considered high self-monitors, and individuals with scores ≤ 10 are considered low self-monitors,¹ and analyze the data using a 1-between (self-monitoring classification), 1-within (drink name) ANOVA, the expected interaction between self-monitoring classification and drink name emerges as a significant effect, $F(1, 187) = 6.56$, $p = .011$, $\eta^2 = .034$. As suggested by the regression analysis, high self-monitors tended to prefer the drinks more when they were called *Fast Track* ($M = 23.49$, $s = 7.71$) than when they were called *Energy Drink Enhancer* ($M = 21.51$, $s = 7.75$), $t(187) = 1.81$, $p < .05$, one-tailed. In contrast, low self-monitors evaluated the drinks named *Energy Drink Enhancer* ($M = 23.97$, $s = 7.39$) more favorably than when the drinks were named *Fast Track*, ($M = 22.44$, $s = 7.57$), $t(187) = 1.84$, $p < .05$, one-tailed.

¹Gangestad and Snyder (1985) provide evidence suggesting that scores on the self-monitoring scale might be better interpreted as the probability of correctly classifying individuals as high or low in self-monitoring than as individuals possessing self-monitoring tendencies to differing degrees. They recommend dividing respondents dichotomously using these cut-off points.

Comparison ratings

For each item on the questionnaire that asked participants to choose between the two products, we assigned participants 1 point each time they chose *Fast Track* and 0 points when they chose *Energy Drink Enhancer*. As the resulting scale was internally consistent ($KR-20 = .94$), we computed an overall comparison score by summing across the five items. Higher scores on this measure indicate more of a preference for *Fast Track*. We then regressed scores on this composite comparison index on centered self-monitoring scale scores, and found that self-monitoring scores were a significant predictor, $t(188) = 2.15$, $\beta = .155$, $p = .003$, $R^2 = .019$. Consistent with the relative rating data, this result indicates that individuals higher in self-monitoring were more likely to endorse *Fast Track* over *Energy Drink Enhancer*.

The results of this study are consistent with our predictions. High self-monitors preferred the energy drink more when its name alluded to a desirable image, whereas low self-monitors preferred the identical product more when its name described the use and function of the product. These results expand our knowledge of the relations between self-monitoring propensities and product evaluation by suggesting that the differing strategies adopted by high and low self-monitors to evaluate everyday consumer products manifest themselves not only in their differential reactions to advertising strategies (Snyder & DeBono, 1985), the physical characteristics of products (DeBono et al., 2003), and actual product performance (e.g., DeBono & Krim, 1997), but also in their responses to a more subtle product cue, the product's name. To the extent that the name evokes a pleasing image, high self-monitors, who chronically strive to present a favorable image to others, tend to prefer that product more than when its name focuses on the product itself. In contrast it appears that low self-monitors, who tend to be more concerned with actual product performance, react more positively when the name of the product relays to the consumer information about what the product is and what it does than when it alludes to a pleasant image.

We believe that the results of our study advance our knowledge of the relations between self-monitoring propensities and product evaluation in an important and novel way. Our data are, to date, the first to demonstrate that the name of a product, in and of itself, is sufficient to alter the product perceptions of high and low self-monitors. Although other variables seemingly conceptually similar to product name, in particular a product's country of origin (which can be, and often is, implied by a product's name), have been demonstrated to have effects similar to the ones we report in this study (i.e., DeBono & Rubin, 1995) numerous studies on the psychology of marketing have demonstrated that country of origin and the name

associated with the product, be it the name of the product itself or the product's brand name, can be considered as independent constructs and in fact exert independent effects on product evaluation and purchasing behavior (Ettison, 1993; Haubl, 1996; Miranda & Konya, 2006; Nebenzahl & Jaffe, 1996; Pecotich & Ward, 2007; Wall, Liefeld, & Heslop, 1991). As such, our research is informative in the sense that it demonstrates that a heretofore unexamined variable that is conceptually distinct from previous studied variables may also significantly impact the product perceptions of high and low self-monitors.

Our results may also aid in our understanding of the more general effects of product names on consumer preferences (e.g., Dawar & Parker, 1994; Homer, 2008; Teas & Agarwal, 2000). It is surely the case that within many product classes, products with image-oriented names as well as products with more self-descriptive names have both successfully captured a significant market share. *Ivory Soap* is a very successful brand, but so are *Suave* and *Irish Spring*; *Corn Flakes* is a staple for many, but *Special K* also has a strong following. One possibility as to why these different types of product names within a product type are successful is that they appeal to different market segments. Perhaps products with image-oriented names are appealing to those consumers who are acutely concerned with the impression they are making on others and who gravitate to products that can serve to enhance the image of the consumer. Products with more self-descriptive names, on the other hand, may be particularly appealing to those consumers who are less concerned with the image they can project by having or using a particular product and who are more interested in actual product performance.

It is important, however, to point out that it may very well be the case that the results we found may be applicable to only certain types of products. As Shavitt and colleagues (Shavitt, 1990; Shavitt et al., 1992) have demonstrated, high and low self-monitors' differential reactions to image versus quality cues may obtain only for those products that can reasonably be marketed with either image or quality appeals. For example, Shavitt et al. (1992, Study 2), found that high self-monitors preferred image-oriented copy and low self-monitors preferred quality-oriented copy for a product (a watch) readily advertised with either a focus on product image or a focus on product quality, but they found no such self-monitoring differences for a product (an air conditioner) relatively incapable of serving image-enhancing purposes. For this latter product, both high and low self-monitors preferred the quality-oriented copy. These findings suggest that high and low self-monitors' disparate reactions to image-evoking and self-descriptive product names may be limited to products amenable to multiple marketing strategies.

That individual differences in self-monitoring propensities may further our understanding of the effects of product names on product perception is consistent with a research strategy advocated by Snyder and Ickes (1985). They suggest that an advantage to studying psychological phenomena from an individual difference perspective is that not only may one gain additional insight into the individual difference construct itself, but one may also achieve an enhanced understanding of the phenomenon under study, as that phenomenon can now be understood in terms of the more general set of behavioral, cognitive, and affective differences among individuals who manifest the construct to different degrees. In the present research, then, not only have we gained additional insight into the psychology of self-monitoring, but we may also have gleaned additional knowledge regarding the psychology of product names.

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