The Effects of Emotions and Product Attachment on Consumer Preferences For New Products

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Research on innovation adoption implicitly assumes that consumers make conscious adoption decisions based on product knowledge, assessment of product benefits, learning costs or perceived product complexity. However, an increasing body of evidence supports the view that affective cues play an important role in consumer choice making. This article explores the influence of emotions and product attachment on consumer preferences toward new products. Building on innovation adoption, psychology and consumer behavior literature we conduct an empirical study to answer the following question: can the way we feel about products we own shape the way we perceive products we do not know?

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In contemporary high-tech consumer goods market, products are launched at an unprecedented rate, and consumers are forced to make their choices among ever more products, functions, and configuration of functions among product alternatives. In addition, new trends in product design add to this complexity by equipping products with aesthetic qualities. In such situations, it is unlikely that the variance in consumer preferences for new products could be fully explained by the cognitive and rational decision making process, as suggested by research on innovation adoption.

Research on innovation adoption assumes that adoption decisions result from a careful assessment of product benefits in relation to previous product knowledge, perceived product complexity, and learning costs (Moreau, Lehmann, and Markman 2001; Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2001; Thompson, Hamilton, and Rust 2005) Consumers are expected to weigh available alternatives against each other, and make full use of accessible information.

In contrast, an increasing body of evidence from consumer behavior studies points to the role of affective cues in consumer choice making and product use, and to the interference and influence of emotions on cognition and judgment. With reference to high-tech consumer goods, studies on paradoxes of technological products, technophobia and feature fatigue (Mick and Fournier 1998, Gilbert, Lee-Kelley and Barton 2003; Thompson, Hamilton and Rust 2005) stress the significance of semi conscious and unconscious aspects of new product evaluation. In addition, studies in the field of product design show that consumer decisions can be influenced by the way new products look (Desmet, 2004). Further, emotional reactions consumers have toward new products can be related to the product they currently own (Strahilevitz and Loewenstein 1998).

In line with these findings, we propose that consumers evaluate new products in the light of products they currently own. In particular, we suggest that the length of product ownership influences positive and negative emotions consumers experience during own product use. These emotions can directly influence consumers’ preferences for unknown, new products. In addition, positive and negative emotions derived from product use can have effect on product attachment. Product attachment represents a special meaning an individual assigns to a product (Kleine and Baker 2004). It is reflected by a variety of emotions and is therefore not equal to positive or negative emotions. Consumers can be happy about a product without becoming attached to it, or may be attached even though the attachment is reflected by negative emotions. As product attachment represents an emotional bond between a person and a specific object, we propose that it mediates the effects of positive and negative emotions on consumer preferences for new products.

We examined the influence of ownership on emotions, and the role of emotions and product attachment on consumer preferences for new products in an empirical study. Three new to the market, high-tech products: an mp3 music player, a PDA, and a mobile phone were used as stimuli. Respondents were asked to evaluate them based on product picture and short description. Participants were then asked to list products they own that in their opinion have similar functions to the presented product, and state how long they owned these products. As a final task, participants were asked to choose one of the products they listed and answer a number of questions related to product use.

The length of product ownership was measured as number of years a product was owned. Preferences for new products were measured using a nine item evaluative scale from Roehm and Sternthal (2001). We classified emotions among the bipolar positive and negative affect dimensions (Russel 1980). Positive emotions were measured using four items, and negative emotions using two items. Product attachment was measured using three items adapted from Ball and Tasaki (1992). All scale items were considered reliable. We used partial least squares (PLS) modeling to examine the links between the length of product ownership, positive and negative affect, product attachment and preferences for new product. Path significance was estimated using bootstrapping (500 re-samples).

The results show that the length of product ownership influenced negative emotions reported by study participants ($\beta=0.484$, $t=6.67, p<.01$, $R^2=0.23$) but had no significant impact on positive emotions. To estimate the mediating effect of product attachment on consumer preferences for new products we followed the procedure of Baron and Kenny (1986).

Both positive and negative emotions influenced product attachment ($\beta=0.686$, $t=12.8, p<.01$) and ($\beta=3.173$, $t=2.46, p<.01$) with $R^2=0.59$. The interaction between negative and positive emotions was insignificant. Both positive and negative emotions had a direct effect on product preferences when product attachment was controlled ($\beta=0.547$, $t=6.35, p<.01$ and $\beta=0.194$, $t=2.15, p<.01$), $R^2=0.423$. Product attachment significantly influenced product preferences, ($\beta=0.310$, $t=3.146, p<.01$, $R^2=0.461$) while direct effect of positive emotions were smaller than in the model in which product attachment was controlled ($\beta=0.328$, $t=2.57, p<.01$), and the direct effect of negative emotions was insignificant. Introducing the additional path between product attachment and preferences for new products had a significant effect of 0.066.

The results show that product ownership influences the emotions consumers experience during product use. Positive and negative emotions elicited through experiences and interactions with own products have an effect on consumer preferences for new products. This effect is mediated by product attachment towards own product.

In conclusion, consumer preferences are, to certain extent, rooted in the emotions derived from product use. It is important for the practitioners to recognize the fact that designing and launching flawless products, supported by emotionally laden advertising might not be enough to win new consumers. It is products’ potential to generate positive emotions that may become a decisive factor in succeeding in saturated and competitive markets.

References


