When Good Pictures Make For Good Products: Consumer Misattribution Effects in Virtual Product Presentation Environments

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Abstract
Virtual product presentation technology allows consumers to “try on” a product by displaying it on their own digital image. Three experiments were conducted to test our hypothesis that the more consumers like their photos, the more they like the product displayed on the photos. The findings show that when consumers virtually try products on their digital image, they respond holistically to the image, but misread their response as arising from what they are focusing on: the product. This misattribution, in turn, results in differential product preferences and evaluations.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The aboutness principle (Higgins 1998) suggests that when people think about something, they usually assume that any thoughts that come to mind, or any feelings they experience, are about whatever is in the focus of their attention at the time of judgment. Hence, they tend to misattribute thoughts and feelings that are elicited by unrelated variables to whatever is in the focus of their attention. Misattribution is a pervasive phenomenon that has been examined from a variety of perspectives, including research on mood-as-information (for reviews, see Schwarz and Clore 1996, 2003), accessibility experiences (e.g., Schwarz et al. 1991), processing fluency (e.g., Nordhielm 2002; Reber et al. 1998; Whitlesea 1993) and priming effects (e.g., Niedenthal 1990; Winkielman et al. 1997). Much of this research in relation to general misattribution effects indicates that people’s judgments of a neutral target can be influenced by various irrelevant sources unless the informative values of their thoughts or feelings is discredited. The purpose of our research is to extend this misattribution literature by examining misattribution processes in a virtual product presentation environment, which is a newly arising area for marketing research.

Research Context and Question

One of the differences between a traditional brick-and-mortar store and an online store is that in online stores consumers cannot try products before they make a purchase decision. However, recently some online retailers in product categories like cosmetics and fashion accessories have started to provide customers with the opportunity to virtually try products using so-called virtual image technology. Consumers can upload their own digital photos and use those photos as “virtual mirrors” to try various products to determine how they would look on them. In the current research, we investigate how a consumer’s preference for a product is influenced by the consumer’s affective responses to the background image on which the product is being virtually tried. Given that consumers can virtually try products before making a purchase decision, it is important to understand how a misattribution process contributes to consumer choice and product evaluation in virtual product presentation environments. Our overarching research hypothesis is that the more consumers like their photos, the more they like the product presented on the photos. In other words, when consumers virtually try products on their digital image, they will respond holistically to the image, but misread their response as arising from the focal object, namely the product. This misattribution, in turn, will result in differential product preferences.

Experiments and Major Findings

We tested our hypothesis in three experiments. In the first experiment, forty-eight female participants evaluated different earrings, virtually presented on their own digital image with a neutral facial expression or with a smiling facial expression. Prior research shows that smiling faces are perceived as more attractive than non-smiling faces (e.g., O’Doherty et al. 2003; Otta et al. 1996). Therefore, we expected the product to be evaluated more favorably when it was virtually presented on participants’ smiling faces than on their non-smiling faces. Empirically, this was the case. In the second experiment, thirty-two female participants were asked to evaluate earrings virtually presented on their own regular photo image and on their mirror image (i.e., a photo equivalent to their reflection in a mirror). According to prior research, people usually prefer either their mirror image (e.g., Mita et al. 1977) or their regular photo image (e.g., Willis and Brown 1987) to the other. Given that people have their own preferred baseline image, we expected that a neutral product will be more positively evaluated when it is virtually presented on a person’s preferred baseline image than on a less-preferred image. In this experiment, the experimental design was within-subjects and the various earrings evaluated by each participant were sometimes presented on her mirror image and at other times on her regular image. To measure each participant’s preferred baseline image, after the main product evaluation task was finished each participant was shown her mirror image and her regular image side-by-side and asked to indicate the one she preferred. The key results revealed that participants evaluated the focal product more favorably when the product was presented on their preferred image: those who preferred their regular photo image over their mirror image also preferred jewelry shown on their regular image over jewelry shown on their mirror image, and vice versa for those who preferred their mirror image over their regular image. None of the participants reported that they had noticed that two different images were used in their product evaluation task. In the last experiment, we investigated whether a similar misattribution effect would occur when consumers evaluate products virtually presented on the digital image of someone they personally know. Fifty-seven female participants evaluated earrings virtually presented on their female instructor’s digital image with her original skin texture or with an enhanced (i.e., smoothed by a computer graphic software) skin texture. As expected, 100% of the participants indicated that they liked the instructor’s enhanced image better (when asked after their product evaluation task) and the enhanced photo resulted in more favorable product evaluations.

Conclusion

In combination, the results of these experiments support our overarching hypothesis that consumers respond holistically to the picture, but misread their response as being due to what they focus on: the product virtually tried on their image. This misattribution process results in differential product preferences, provided that the consumers remain unaware of the true source of their positive feelings. Our studies do not contribute to our understanding of how misattribution processes influence consumer choice and product evaluation, but also provide marketers with important insights into the potential benefits of using the virtual product presentation technology. More significantly, however, this research also adds to the current literature on the role of subjective feelings in the consumer misattribution process, by providing concrete marketing-specific examples of misattribution effects in the new context of virtual product presentation.

References


