

# When does context matter in product evaluations?

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In most real world settings, consumers encounter and evaluate products in mixed environments – aspirin and deodorant shelved side-by-side at a pharmacy, or an ad for a tropical vacation next to fashion spread in a magazine. Exposure to information about certain products can cause “spillover” to evaluations of subsequent products. But when does this influence occur?

In a forthcoming study in the April 2008 issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research*, Kyeongheui Kim (University of Toronto) and Joan Meyers-Levy (University of Minnesota) had participants first look at a series of 15 brands, all either of high or low quality as determined in a pretest (i.e., Aveda vs. Suave, Rolex vs. Casio). Some were shown the brand names in isolation on a computer screen, while others saw all fifteen at once and were asked to organize the brands into either similar or dissimilar categories.

The participants were then exposed to an ad for a Caribbean vacation that touted either an abstract benefit (relaxation) or a clearly calibrated benefit (price), and asked to provide their evaluations of the featured resort based on several qualities.

“We predicted and found that because consumers who adopt an item-specific processing mindset treat data in an absolute manner by considering each piece of information independently of others, they reliably refrain from engaging in a comparison process during the judgment stage,” Kim and Meyers-Levy explain.

They continue: “Yet, this was not so for consumers who adopted a relational processing mindset, which involves noticing relationships between pieces of data and thus treating data in a relative (i.e., potentially comparative) manner. These consumers’ target product evaluations were shaped during both the encoding and judgment stages.”

In other words, when the “target product” – the vacation – was positioned concretely, people were able to apply the relational processing mindset that had been stimulated in the earlier part of the experiment.

The researchers suggest that marketers seeking to influence product placement in a store should consider additional factors beyond the quality of the other items in close proximity. For example, past research has shown that women tend to utilize relational processing while shopping, while men favor item-specific processing.

Source: University of Chicago

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