DEVELOPING GOOD THEORY

CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Joan Meyers-Levy
Holden-Werlich Professor of Marketing
University of Minnesota

APPROACHES TO THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Deductive (Zhu & Meyers-Levy, 2009, JMR—surface materials of store display fixtures affect product perceptions)

Self-construal theory: Consumers view self in interdependent or independent way. These ways of viewing the self may generalize to their way of viewing/processing products they see on store display fixtures. Prediction is interdependents (independents) will assimilate (contrast) qualities of display fixtures with the products that hold them, producing different perceptions of the products.

Inductive (Meyers-Levy & Zhu 2007, JCR—ceiling height affects breadth of processing)

Airport musing: Low plane (higher train) ceiling prompts feelings of confinement (freedom). Could ceilings also affect breadth of thinking? Theorize high (low) ceilings induce relational (item-specific)processing , affecting categorization and evaluations of products.

HYBRID APPROACH: COMBO OF DEDUCTION & INDUCTION

Leapfrogging from ceiling: Can bodily sensations from store flooring (soft carpet vs. hard tile) affect consumers' judgments of products?

Deduction from Mood as Information theory (Schwarz & Clore 1983)

Anticipates assimilation effect

- But can such effects reverse at times (contrast effect)?

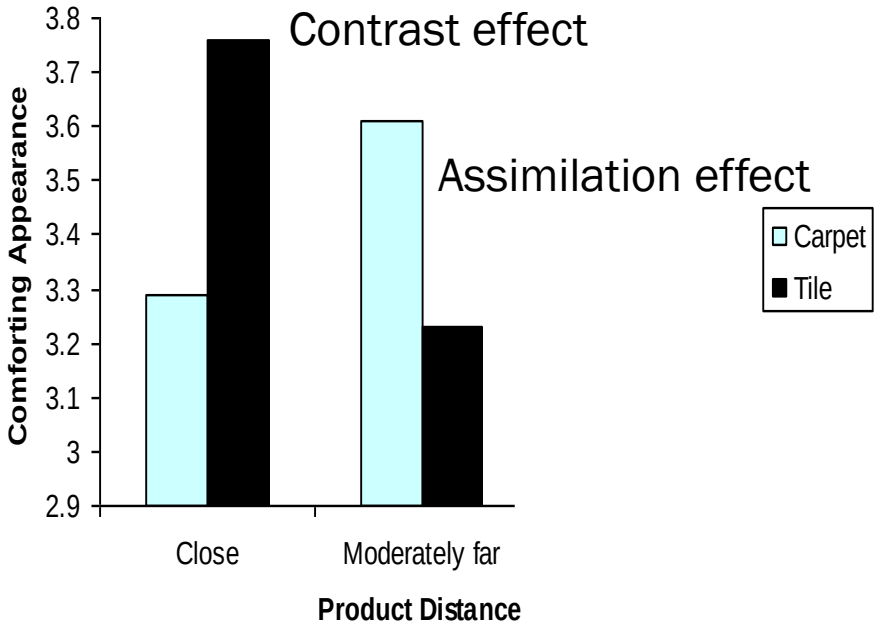
Induction from a finding–Close-up scenes stimulated strong visceral responses, while distant scenes produced relatively dispassionate, thoughtful consideration (Artz , Tybout, & Kehret-Ward 1993)

Theory/Prediction: When view products at close distance, assessments more + when flooring is soft carpet vs. hard tile (assimilation). But when view at far distance, assessments more +favorable when flooring is hard tile vs. soft carpet (contrast).

STUDY 1

2 (flooring: carpet, tile) x 2 (product distance: close-6”, moderately far-5’)

DV: how comforting product appearance was (e.g., soft, smooth, comforting)



INDUCTION FROM FINDINGS: CONTEXT EFFECT THEORY (SCHWARZ & BLESS 2007)

Contextually activated data (feelings or concepts) can affect product assessments at:

a) Encoding—frame to guide interpretion of target → initial impression

and/or

b) Formal judgment stage when compare product to a standard

At encoding, use as interpretational frame → *assimilation effect*

If judgment stage occurs, use as handy standard of comparison. Comparison process underscores differences, so *contrast effect* (Schwarz &Bless 2007)

What determines whether people use activated data at one or the other stage?

Clarity of mental representation of target item (product) (Kim & M-L 2008, JCR)

Note: the distance consumer stands from product should affect clarity of representation

Clarity of product features typically increases product is close vs. moderately far away

- Accounts for observation of contrast at close distance & assimilation at far distance

DEDUCTIONS FROM CONTEXT EFFECT THEORY

- Effects should concep replicate on assessments of firmness (tile vs. carpet)
- 2 boundary conditions

a) Effects eliminated if product is unambig in its firmness (metal frame chair as 2nd product—people know conceptually that metal if unambiguously firm)

b) Effects eliminated if people made aware of true source of body sensations

Study 2 conceptually replicated & upheld these extensions

Study 3 identified additional deduction, extending theory further. Used self monitoring scale to show effects driven by flooring-induced body sensations and not semantic associations to flooring

Study 4 ruled our rival explanation (CLT) & unexpectedly identified boundary conditions that entirely reversed when both (assimilation & contrast) effects occur—all derived thru induction!

CONCLUSIONS

- Theory development tends to be an iterative process
- Need to develop both strong deductive and inductive skills in developing theory
- There are limits to most researchers' deductive capabilities. In my experience, the most interesting and path breaking insights generally emerge from projects that use both deductive and inductive skills, with the more ground breaking insights arising from unpredicted findings that require a strong dose of induction. These latter insights frequently move our understanding to a significantly higher level.