Seeing Is Not Believing: The Influence of Advertising Skepticism on Brand Extension Evaluations

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Brand extension has been for many years one of the most popular strategies to launch novel products. Despite the extensive literature on the subject, a limited number of studies have examined the effect of individual differences on the evaluation of brand extensions. The objective of the current research is to examine the influence of advertising skepticism on brand extension evaluations. Advertising skepticism is related to consumers’ tendency to disbelieve advertising claims (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998). Since most brand extensions are introduced in advertising messages, understanding how advertising skepticism affects how consumers interpret, evaluate, and respond to these offerings is crucial to their adoption and eventual success. Studies have found that one of the key success factors for brand extensions is their perceived similarity to their parent brand (Aaker & Keller, 1990). While a highly similar brand extension is likely to be promptly accepted by consumers, a highly dissimilar brand extension is very likely to be rejected. However, the evaluation of moderately similar brand extensions is contingent upon the specific conditions of the new offering. Based on previous studies showing that moderately similar brand extensions are processed more analytically (Boush & Loken, 1991) and on the observation that more skeptical consumers rely on analytical information processing (Escalas, 2007), we hypothesize that consumers with high levels of advertising skepticism will evaluate less favorably moderately similar brand extensions compared to consumers with low levels of advertising skepticism. Similar and dissimilar brand extensions will not be affected by advertising skepticism. These hypotheses are tested in two experiments.

Marco Teórico:
Skepticism toward advertising has been defined either as a mistrustful predisposition (Boush, Friestad, & Rose, 1994) or a negatively valenced attitude (Mangleburg & Bristol, 1998) towards motives and claims made by advertisers. Although skepticism toward advertising is mostly considered to be a predisposition (i.e., a trait), Forehand and Grier (2002) sustain that skepticism can also be produced by situational variables that induce a temporary state of disbelief such as marketing stimuli like the advertising of a new product. Although advertising skepticism is a necessary, beneficial, and healthy trait that protects consumers from deceptive marketing tactics (Koslow, 2000), for many marketers it also poses a serious threat because overly skeptical consumers may become too distrustful. Prior research has found that skeptical consumers are more critical and evaluate ad claims in a more analytical fashion (Nielsen & Escalas, 2010). Consumers learn through the experience that advertising is meant to be persuasive, leading to the development of persuasion knowledge that helps them to “identify how, when, and why marketers try to influence them” (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p.1). In the process of developing persuasion knowledge, consumers also develop coping tactics, avoiding being drawn into the advertisement, and remaining detached from and skeptical of the advertisement (Escalas, 2007). Acceptance of advertising claims as true is one of the pre-requisites for the persuasion process. If consumers are predisposed to disbelieve ad claims, the route to persuasion is closed. Consequently, skeptical consumers are less persuaded by ads, which can result in lower evaluations of products advertised. If the product being advertised is a new brand extension, then it is more likely that consumers with higher levels of advertising skepticism evaluate them less favorably than consumers with lower levels of advertising skepticism. However, that is more likely to occur for moderately similar brand extensions than to similar and dissimilar brand extensions. According to the
categorization model proposed by Smith, Shoben and Rips (1974), if there is a clear match or mismatch between the extension and the parent brand, the evaluation process is complete. However, if some features of the extension match and others not, a second evaluation process is required. During the second stage of the evaluation process, the consumer makes a careful comparison between characteristics of the product category and the new product in an effort to determine whether the new product is representative of the parent brand (Boush & Loken, 1991). Brand extensions perceived as similar or dissimilar elicit only the first stage of the categorization and moderately similar brand extensions require a second, slower and more analytical stage. Because of their higher ability of engaging in analytical processing, skeptical consumers are more likely to identify existing inconsistencies between a moderately similar brand extension and its parent brand. This process could result in less favorable evaluations of the moderately similar extension and higher parent brand dilution effect. However, because similar and dissimilar extensions are processed automatically, degree of advertising skepticism should not affect them.

Método de investigação se pertinente:
Two experiments test the research hypotheses and are described next. Study 1 Two pre-tests were conducted to select the stimuli for the experiment. In the first, we selected the brand (Diamante Negro) and in the second, a highly dissimilar (potato chips) and a moderately similar (chocolate cookies) proposed brand extension. One hundred and two people participated in a between-subjects experiment in which brand extension similarity was manipulated (low vs. moderate) and advertising skepticism was measured. Participants were given 30 seconds to review a magazine advertisement featuring the new product and then evaluated the brand extensions using five items answered on a 7-point Likert scale. A global evaluation index was created averaging the five items. Parent brand dilution was measured by asking participants to indicate to what extent their opinion about the parent brand had changed after reviewing the advertisement of the new product. Advertising skepticism was measured using the 9-item scale developed by Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) answered on a 7-point Likert scale. To check the manipulation of perceived similarity, participants were asked to indicate to what extent the brand extension was similar to a chocolate bar (1=very dissimilar; 7=very similar). Study 2 In study 2, we sampled clients of an electronic store, added a highly similar proposed brand extension, and manipulated advertising skepticism. The brand (Bis) and the proposed extensions (iced tea, chocolate bar, and ice cream) were chosen using the same criteria of study 1. Two hundred and eighteen subjects participated in a 2 (advertising skepticism: present vs. control) x 3 (brand extension perceived similarity: low vs. moderate vs. high) between-subjects, experimental design. Participants assigned to the advertising skepticism manipulation were asked to imagine that they worked for a consumer rights magazine and one of their tasks was to write reviews of advertisements featuring new products (Nielsen & Escalas, 2010). They should, therefore, spend some time critically analyzing the alleged magazine advertisement because they would be asked to write down their impressions at a later time. Participants assigned to the control group did not receive these instructions. The same measures of study 1 were employed in study 2.

Resultados e contribuições do trabalho para a área:
The results of the two studies show that consumers with higher levels of advertising skepticism report less favorable evaluations of moderately similar brand extensions compared to consumers with lower levels of advertising skepticism. Moreover, parent brand dilution is also higher among consumers with higher levels of advertising skepticism. The difference observed for moderately similar brand extensions are attenuated when the proposed brand extension is dissimilar to its parent brand. Our findings contribute to a limited but increasing
stream of research that explores individual differences in consumer responses to brand extensions. The current research adds to this body of knowledge by examining how consumer advertising skepticism influences the evaluations of brand extensions and to the best of our knowledge, no previous research has examined this relationship. Consumer skepticism appears to be a relevant construct for the evaluation of new products such as brand extensions and understanding skeptical consumers is of considerable importance because they are generally less positive in response to advertising (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 2005). Therefore, marketers and advertisers have to find creative means to overcome consumers’ skepticism if they want their products to be adopted. Previous research on consumer skepticism has provided several advices that could also be useful for advertisers in charge of brand extension advertising. The main recommendations are avoiding messages appearing to be one-side or unfair, messages whose conclusions do not seem to follow from the facts, messages with discrepant claims or claims that are not easily verifiable, and giving preference to emotional messages rather than informational messages. More importantly, though, and going beyond these generic advices, we believe that advertising of brand extensions should emphasize the existing links between the parent brand and the new extension so consumers can promptly perceive the similarities between them. Facilitating the comprehension of the similarities between the new product and the brand can help consumers with high levels of advertising skepticism to cope with the inconsistencies identified during the information processing stage. Messages should also reinforce that the company behind the brand has the skills required to market the new product and why it is a legitimate exemplar of the brand. Despite the interesting findings, we recognize some caveats of this research. One limitation arises due to the use of a sample of students in the first study and a sample of electronic commerce clients in the second study, limiting the generalizability of results. The robustness of our results across different product categories is unknown since we used as stimuli in our experiments a limited number of brands and extensions. Future studies should attempt to generalize the results found here to broader samples of consumers and a broader set of brands and extensions. Future research could also focus on the mediational mechanisms that might account for the effects observed here. One of the variables that could account for the mediation role is processing effort (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). We hypothesize that, because skeptical consumers are more likely to engage in analytic processing, they spend more resources processing brand extensions than non-skeptical consumers and this difference is more pronounced for moderately similar brand extensions. We also suggest future studies to examine the moderating effect of corporate intentions to launch the brand extension. Consistent with attribution theory (Jones & Davis, 1965), consumers attempt to understand firm motives for marketing communications. Following from this rational, the launch of a highly dissimilar brand extension could trigger consumer suspicions, which could result in less favorable evaluations of the brand extension and higher parent brand dilution effect. Therefore, investigating mediators and moderators related to the phenomenon examined are important insofar as they provide greater insight into the brand extension strategy from both a theoretical and a practical standpoint.

Referências bibliográficas:
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