

Why a niche category signals high quality?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to study whether positioning the same product in a niche versus mass-market category would signal quality differently. Drawing from the specialization concept, it is proposed that a product positioned in a niche category will be perceived as one of higher quality compared with the same product positioned in a mass-market category. Additionally, the product's main feature should be perceived as possessing higher quality than an additional feature. In order to test the research questions, three experiments were conducted. The first experiment used price perception as a surrogate for product quality perception. The second experiment measured product quality perception directly. The third experiment measured feature quality perception. The findings reveal that the same product positioned in a niche (versus mass-market) category is perceived as possessing higher quality, along with its main (versus additional) feature.

Price perception is not a surrogate for quality perception. Managers would benefit from this research by applying the knowledge gained in launching a product. That is, those who launch a product with combined features should consider the impact of the category in which it positions that product. The main contribution of this research is to offer a new perspective in positioning, specifically, to use category entry as a quality signal.

Keywords: Quality signal, Specialization, Positioning, Niche category, Consumer perception

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1. Introduction

One way to innovate a new product is to combine two product features, one from each of two categories, into one product. The marketer must then decide in which category the new product should be positioned. One example is a combined binocular-video recorder. The marketer can either position the new product as a binocular that comes with a video recording feature, or as a video recorder with a binocular feature. In the former positioning, the main category is binocular, while the main category in the latter positioning is the video recorder. A binocular is considered a niche category compared with a video recorder. It is an interesting question as to whether changing the positioning of a product would signal quality differently. According to the quality signal theory (Nelson, 1970), information asymmetry exists between the sender and the receiver. The sender or marketer tends to send a positive signal to consumers (Connelly et al., 2011).

Specialization is one method a marketer can employ to signal quality (Kalra and Li, 2008). Drawing from specialization literature in various contexts, specialization is perceived as an expertise that produces higher-quality results than what generalists produce (Dunn and Mayhew, 2004; Lim and Tan, 2008; Tolman and Mullendore, 2003). Kalra and Li developed a mathematical model to prove that specialization signals quality, especially when consumers are uncertain about product quality (Kalra and Li, 2008). It can also be inferred from Krishnan's specialization concept that a niche product should have higher quality than a mass-market product, possibly because the niche producer must invest in building its niche expertise

(Krishnan, 2001). Therefore, a product positioned in a narrower niche or more specialized category should be perceived as possessing higher quality than a product positioned in a mass-market category that requires no specialized skill. A group of scholars believe that consumers use price as a representative of perceived quality (McConnell, 1968; Shugan, 1984). Therefore, high price indicates high quality (Monroe, 1973; J. C. Olson, 1977). In study 1, the researcher will measure price perception as a surrogate for perceived quality. In study 2, the researcher will measure perceived quality directly. The specialization concept can be applied in various contexts.

The main feature is directly associated with the category in which the producer specializes. Therefore, the main feature should be perceived as having higher quality than an additional feature. The researcher will measure feature quality perception in study 3. The three experiments were conducted in Thailand. The results support the hypotheses that a product in a niche category has a higher quality perception than that in a mass-market category. However, although price signals quality, price perception is not a surrogate for quality perception. The current research extends the quality signal theory and specialization concept by testing the quality signal of niche versus mass-market categories, and the main feature versus the additional one. The findings contribute to the topic of product management.

2. Literature review

Positioning

Positioning is the creation of brand perception in a consumer's mind. The positioning must be relevant to consumers, as well as differentiate the brand from its competitors (Arnott, 1992; Ghodeswar, 2008). As a result, positioning creates the reason consumers want to buy a product (Blankson et al., 2014; Wind, 1982). To achieve this result, positioning requires an iterative process comprising proactive management and monitoring (Arnott, 1992). According to Aaker, brand association is anything about a brand in a consumer's memory (Aaker, 1991, 1996). Consumers can associate with a brand as a result of its positioning. Positioning is part of the market-entry strategy used to launch a new product. Prior research found that early entry helps a brand to differentiate and to signal quality. Competitive positioning leads to consumer satisfaction (Rodríguez-Pinto et al., 2008). Much new product launch literature has been written in the context of brand extension, which is a new product launch as an extension of its parent brand.

The literature in this area puts the emphasis on the fit concept, both the fit between the new extension and the parent brand, as well as the fit between the new extension and the category (Sheinin, 1998). Other literature discusses how fit affects factors such as promotion evaluation (Shen, 2014). The main concerns lie in cannibalization and how the extension might hurt the parent brand (Hoek et al., 2003; Kim and Lavack, 1996). This paper's context is not necessarily brand extension; it could be a new product launch unrelated to a parent brand. Prior research also examined how to position a brand within a category.

For example, Jarvis and Goodman found that in the wine category, a small brand should position itself in a niche segment, while a big brand should focus on attributes that enhance variety seeking (Jarvis and Goodman, 2005). While prior research has focused on different players within one category, this paper discusses how to choose a category for a product, i.e., to decide whether the product should be positioned in a relatively more niche category or a relatively more mass-market category. This paper uses a product that combines binocular and video recording features. Positioning the product as a binocular with a video recording feature places it in a niche category. Positioning the product as a video recorder with a binocular feature places it in a mass-market category.

Quality signal

Even though the term quality does not literally carry a positive connotation, quality is defined as the superiority a product has relative to its competitors (Garvin, 1988; Zeithamal, 1988). Generally, sellers and consumers do not have the same level of knowledge about product quality. According to the quality signal theory (Nelson, 1970), this represents information asymmetry. As a result, consumers have to look for quality signals or cues, which can be intrinsic or extrinsic. If the signal is part of the physical product or process, such as material or texture, it is an intrinsic cue. To change an intrinsic cue, the product to be consumed must change as well. If the signal is related to the product, but is not part of the product or process, it is an extrinsic cue. Changing the extrinsic cue will not affect the product to be consumed. Examples of extrinsic cues are brand, price, and origin (J. Olson and Jacoby, 1972).

In the current paper, category is an extrinsic cue because it does not change the product itself; its role is to signal product quality. One product positioned in different categories should signal product quality differently. Being in a niche category is viewed as something specialist in nature (Carroll, 1984). Specialization signals quality. When products in a brand portfolio are compatible or convey similar skills, a specialized expertise signals quality (Berger et al., 2007). Similarly, a firm that enters a single category rather than multiple categories is viewed as a specialist and signals quality (Kalra and Li, 2008). When a firm launches an extension from its parent brand, a “line extension” within the same product category transfers the quality perception of the parent brand better than a “brand extension” into another product category (Dens and De Pelsmacker, 2010).

Line extension uses the same expertise in the same category, and therefore is perceived as a more effective quality transfer. Therefore, the skill to produce a niche product should not be commonly available in the market as it is in the mass-market category. The perceived quality of the niche product produced by a true specialist should be higher than that from producers who are not players in the category. In other words, the niche versus mass-market positioning is considered a category membership which serves as a stereotype for consumers.

In this paper, it is hypothesized that consumers will perceive a binocular with a video recording feature to have a higher quality than a video recorder with a binocular feature because a binocular is in a relatively more niche category than a video recorder. In other words, other things being equal, niche positioning should lead to higher quality perception than a mass-market positioning. The above discusses the quality perception at the product level, hypothesizing that a niche category signals higher quality than a mass-market category. The quality signal concept should apply to the product feature level as well.

This study refers to two types of product features: a main feature and an additional feature. For a binocular with a video recording feature, the binocular function is the main feature or, in other words, a category feature. A video recording feature comprises an additional feature. For a video recorder with a binocular feature, the recording function is the main feature, and the binocular feature is additional. The main feature is associated to the category in which the brand operates, while the additional feature is supplementary. Therefore, consumers should perceive that the main feature has higher quality than the additional feature. In other words, precisely because it is positioned as the main feature, it should signal quality differently compared with the additional feature.

Quality perception and price

It is widely accepted that consumers generally refer to a reference price when estimating price (Janiszewski and Lichtenstein, 1999). Specifically, they may refer to the previous price a retailer charged, prices at other retailers, or the suggested retail price from the manufacturer

(Federal Trade Commission, 1986). There are several price theories, such as adaptation-level theory (Helson, 1964a), range theory (Helson, 1964b), range-frequency theory (Parducci, 1965), and frame of reference (Ostrom and Upshaw, 1968). Despite differences in some aspects of price theory, all agree with the price-reference concept. The price of a niche product usually starts low and then rises. In contrast, the price of a mass-market product usually starts high and then falls (Bergemann and Valimaki, 2006). Consumers are usually familiar with these aspects of high-price niche products and low-price mass-market products.

Additionally, prior research found that price is positively related with value or quality perception (Beneke et al., 2013). As a result, when a product is positioned in a niche category, the perceived price should be higher compared with the same product being positioned in a mass-market category. For example, a binocular with a video recording feature (positioned in the niche binocular category) should be perceived as higher priced than a video recorder that has a binocular feature (positioned in the mass-market video recorder category).

From the literature review discussed above, three hypotheses emerge as follows:

- H1.* The price perception of a binocular that comes with a video recording feature is higher than that of a video recorder that comes with a binocular feature.
- H2.* The quality perception of a binocular that comes with a video recording feature is higher than that of a video recorder that comes with a binocular feature.
- H3.* A main feature has a higher quality perception than that of an additional feature.

3. Methodology

To test the hypotheses, the researcher first ensured that a binocular represents a niche product and a video recorder represents a mass-market product. Then, the researcher conducted three experiments to test the three hypotheses respectively. ANOVA was employed to analyze the results. The detail of the manipulation check and the three experiments are as follows.

Manipulation check:

This research proposes that consumers perceive a niche product to have higher quality than a mass-market product. Therefore, the important manipulation is that the binocular is perceived to be more of a niche product compared with a video recorder. On average, the binocular ($M = 1.45$, $SE = 0.10$) is seen as significantly more of a niche product than the video recorder: ($M = 3.45$, $SE = 0.17$), $t(59) = -11.05$, $p < 0.05$, $r = 0.14$.

Study1: Price perception

Sixty undergraduate students at Thammasat University in Thailand participated in a within-subject research design. They read a product description and wrote their perceived price of the product. The four product descriptions were “a binocular that comes with a video recording feature,” “a video recorder that comes with a binocular feature” and the two control cells of single products with one feature. The one-way ANOVA shows that the perceived price among the four product descriptions differs significantly: $F(3, 236) = 5.913$, $p = 0.001$. The one with the highest perceived price is a video recorder that comes with a binocular feature with a mean of 33,609.98 baht, followed by a binocular that comes with a video recording feature of 28,090.00 baht. The third one is a video recorder with a mean of 12,014.98 baht. The last one is a binocular with a mean of 8,979.17 Baht.

Note that one euro is about 40 Thai baht, and 1 USD is about 35 Thai baht. The two products emphasizing one category with an additional feature had the highest perceived price, followed by the products with a single feature. Within each product type, the video recorder, which is a mass-market product, is perceived to have a price higher than that of the binocular. The results

do not support the initial expectation that the niche category should be perceived as having a higher price. The researcher then conducted two follow-up focus groups and found that the respondents rated the video recorder price highly because they all have a video recording feature in their smart phones. Therefore, they perceive that a product that highlights this feature would have to be a professional model with a correspondingly high price. Study 2 measures perceived quality directly, with an expanded respondent profile to include working people.

Table 1: Price Perception

Product Description	Mean of Price Perception (Thai Baht)
A video recorder that comes with a binocular feature	33,609.98
A binocular that comes with a video recording feature	28,090.00
A video recorder	12,014.98
A binocular	8,979.17

Study 2: Product quality perception

Five hundred and sixteen respondents participated in a between-subject design experiment. One of the six stimuli was randomly shown to the respondents. In study 1, the stimuli are a binocular that comes with a video recording feature, a video recorder that comes with a binocular feature, a binocular, and a video recorder. In study 2, two stimuli added to the study are the additional control scenarios that describe the product with both product features, but do not put emphasis on any product. One is a binocular and video recorder, and the other one is a video recorder and binocular. The identical product picture is presented with the different product descriptions. The key measure is perceived quality. Lastly, the product involvement is also measured.

The respondent average age was 25.4 years old, with males comprising 32 percent of the sampling. The manipulation check is the same as in study 1. The research participants were randomly assigned to look at one of the six stimuli. After that, they were asked to rate their perceived quality and product involvement scores. The one-way ANOVA shows that the perceived quality differs significantly across the six stimuli: $F(5, 510) = 4.265, p = 0.001$. Within each of the three product types — first, one category emphasis with an additional feature; second, single-feature; and third, dual-feature (no category focus) — the product highlighting the binocular has a higher perceived quality score. The perceived quality scores (SE) are a binocular with a video recording feature, 3.57 (0.08); a video recorder with a binocular feature, 3.12 (0.08); a binocular, 3.52 (0.09); a video recorder, 3.27 (0.09); a binocular and video recorder, 3.42 (0.08); and a video recorder and binocular, 3.34 (0.08).

Table 2: Quality Perception

Product Description	Mean of Perceived Quality Scores
A binocular that comes with a video recording feature	3.57
A video recorder that comes with a binocular feature	3.52
A binocular	3.42
A video recorder	3.34
A binocular and video recorder	3.27
A video recorder and binocular	3.12

Regarding the main research question, the binocular with a video recording feature ($M = 3.57$, $SE = 0.08$) has significantly higher quality perception than the video recorder with a binocular feature: ($M = 3.12$, $SE = 0.08$), $t(83) = 3.639$, $p < 0.05$, $r = -0.024$. As expected, the product positioned in a niche category has significantly higher perceived quality than the same product positioned in a mass-market category.

Product involvement was measured to ensure that the perceived quality is due to product positioning, not product involvement. The one-way ANOVA shows that the average product involvement is not significantly different across the six scenarios: $F(5, 505) = 1.180$, $p = 0.318$. That is, the perceived quality score is a result of product positioning.

The findings from study 2 reveal that positioning a product in a niche (versus mass-market) category leads to higher quality perception. To further extend the specialization literature, the main (versus additional) feature should be perceived as higher quality because consumers expect the company to have relatively higher expertise in the main rather than the additional feature. Study 3 tests how consumers perceive the feature quality.

Study 3: Feature quality perception

Testing feature quality perception involves two steps. The first step is to test the same feature across two versions of product positioning: the same feature positioned as a main feature and also as an additional feature. The second step is to test the different features of the same product: the main versus additional feature. Sixty undergraduate students at Thammasat University in Thailand participated in a within-subject research design. They read the product description, and then rated the perceived quality of both the main and additional features. The product descriptions are “a binocular that comes with a video recording feature” and “a video recorder that comes with a binocular feature.”

To test whether consumers perceive the main feature as having higher quality than the additional feature, the researcher first tested whether the binocular feature is perceived to be of higher quality when it is a main (category) feature (a binocular that comes with a video recording feature) rather than an additional feature (a video recorder that comes with a binocular feature). The results show that on average, when a binocular feature is the main feature ($M = 4.00$, $SE = 0.11$), consumers perceive it to have significantly higher quality than when the binocular feature is an additional feature: ($M = 3.34$, $SE = .13$), $t(59) = 4.696$, $p < 0.05$, $r = 0.30$.

The researcher then tested whether the video recording feature is perceived to be of a higher quality when it is a main (category) feature (a video recorder that comes with a binocular feature) rather than an additional feature (a binocular that comes with a video recording feature). The results show that on average, when the video recording feature is the main feature ($M = 4.13$, $SE = 0.12$), consumers perceive it to have significantly higher quality than when the video recording feature is an additional feature: ($M = 3.30$, $SE = 0.14$), $t(59) = 4.764$, $p < 0.05$, $r = 0.08$.

The above tested the same feature across different products. To cross-check the above results, the researcher tested the different features of the same product. For a binocular with a video recording feature, it is found that on average, the binocular feature as the main feature ($M = 4.00$, $SE = 0.11$) has significantly higher perceived quality than a video recording feature as an additional feature: ($M = 3.30$, $SE = 0.14$), $t(59) = 4.425$, $p < 0.05$, $r = 0.22$. For a video recorder with a binocular feature, it is found that on average, a video recording feature as the main feature ($M = 4.13$, $SE = 0.12$) has significantly higher quality perception than a binocular as an additional feature: ($M = 3.33$, $SE = 0.13$), $t(59) = 6.626$, $p < 0.05$, $r = 0.52$.

4. Conclusion and discussion

The current research extends the quality signal and specialization literature in proposing that a niche (versus mass-market) positioning signals higher quality. The first study found that the price perception of “a binocular that comes with a video recording feature” is relatively lower than the price of “a video recorder that comes with a binocular feature” even though the binocular category is more of a niche category compared with that of the video recorder category. Qualitative research reveals that because consumers have decent video recording features in their smart phones, they expect products that highlight video recording to be professional models with correspondingly high prices. This is in line with prior literature stating that price is not necessarily representative of perceived quality, especially when there is another quality signal such as the product itself (Gardner, 1971). Prior research found that price perception leads to value perception (Beneke et al., 2013). The current research extends that the reverse relationship is not the case.

The second study measures perceived quality directly, and found that one product positioned in a niche (versus mass-market) category has higher perceived quality. Lastly, study 3 found that the main feature is perceived as having higher quality than the additional feature. The current paper extends the quality signal and specialization literature to explain how consumers perceive the different positioning of the same product, as well as how consumers perceive the main versus the additional features. Marketers can apply this learning to their positioning strategy to signal quality to consumers more effectively. Framing product positioning to be more niche would lead to higher product quality perception than positioning in a mass-market category.

This research is without limitation, and thus presents new research opportunities. Although the current research measured product involvement and found no difference in the scores when respondents evaluated the product positioned in niche and mass-market categories, positioning niche products in other contexts can possibly reduce the perceived relevancy with the product. Future research should further study this issue and look into ways of positioning a product to be in a niche category while having consumers still feel its relevancy. This paper studies the niche versus mass-market category positioning.

Other types of positioning would affect consumer perception in many ways. For example, a milk-and-fruit-juice product positioned in the fruit juice category should have its key benefit perceived as being refreshing, whereas in the milk category, consumers should perceive it as more filling. A milk-and-coffee product positioned in the milk category should be perceived as healthy, whereas in the coffee category, consumers should perceive it as tasty. Future research could look into different aspects of product positioning and its impact on the quality signal.

Additionally, consumers view a company as better at producing the main feature than additional features. Future research could look into ways to optimize the quality perception of products with multiple features. For example, would having an alliance in co-producing additional features help to signal quality and, if so, how? In discussing other aspects of the main feature, if it is perceived as high quality, does that mean managers should focus on the main feature's benefits in their communications? Future research should also study how consumers perceive the expertise of a conglomerate that has multiple offerings. Does having multiple offerings harm the quality perception? If yes, at what level does it take effect? For example, does it happen at the company level, the business unit level, or at the product level?

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Appendix: Stimulus



New Model!

Binocular

that comes with a
VDO recording feature
2in1



New Model!

VDO Recorder

that comes with a
binocular feature
2in1



New Model!

Binocular

Appendix: Stimulus (Continue)



New Model!

VDO Recorder



New Model!

**Binocular and
VDO recorder
2in1**



New Model!

**VDO recorder and
Binocular
2in1**