Thinking Inside the Box: Why Consumers Enjoy Constrained Creative Experiences

Darren W. Dahl, University of British Columbia, Canada
C. Page Moreau, University of Colorado, US

From cooking kits to home improvement shows, consumers are increasingly seeking out products designed to help them be creative. In this research, we examine why consumers participate in creative activities and under what conditions these experiences are the most enjoyable. A qualitative study first identifies consumers’ motivations for undertaking creative pursuits. Two experimental studies are then used to demonstrate how the constraints offered by creativity products (e.g., instructions and target outcomes) influence consumers’ motivation and overall task enjoyment.

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Darren W. Dahl and C. Page Moreau

Since paint-by-number kits surged in popularity in the 1950′s, consumers have sought out products designed to assist them in being creative. “Self-expression for the time deprived” has created demand for products offered by firms ranging from specialty crafts (e.g., Martha Stewart) to home improvement (e.g., Lowe’s). Among the many products offering constrained creative experiences are kits (e.g., model trains, needlepoint), how-to guides (e.g., cook books, home repair, landscaping), and inspirational sources (e.g., home improvement programs). We consider these products as offering “constrained” creative opportunities because the products themselves explicitly constrain elements of the process (via a set of instructions) and/or the outcome (via a visual representation of the end product). The recent sales growth in these categories suggests that consumers value these constraints, and a central objective of this research is to understand why.

More specifically, the goals of this research are first, to understand consumers’ motivations for engaging in creative tasks and second, to examine how constraints influence the quality of those experiences. A qualitative study is initially used to address these goals. Two experiments then build on the qualitative results, offering the first experimental evidence documenting the conditions under which consumers enjoy creative activities. The experiments also measure and test specific mediators to explain why consumers enjoy such tasks.

In the qualitative study, twelve respondents from eight different hobby areas (woodworking, scrap-booking, sewing, cooking, model building, card-making, quilting, jewelry-making) discussed their motivations for undertaking their hobbies. They also explained how products in their areas (e.g., kits, books, classes) influenced their experiences. Data analysis from these interviews revealed seven different basic motivations for undertaking the creative tasks, with the needs of competence and autonomy the most frequently discussed. The data also helped to identify the key pros and cons offered by creativity products. Interestingly, most of the products influenced the needs for competence (positively) and autonomy (negatively).

The findings from the qualitative study suggested the relevance for cognitive evaluation theory (CET) for further studies of consumers’ creative experiences (Ryan and Deci 2000). The theory focuses specifically on two important determinants of self-motivation, the needs for autonomy and competence. Thus, we derive a series of hypotheses based on the theory to predict how the constraints imposed by creativity products (e.g., step-by-step instructions and target outcomes) will influence consumers’ motivations during and enjoyment of creative experiences. In the experimental studies, participants engaged in hands-on creative tasks: cookie making and decorating.

In the first experimental study, two factors were manipulated between-subjects: (1) instructions (step-by-step provided vs. not provided) and (2) target outcome (picture of the final product provided vs. no picture provided). Participants were 100 undergraduate students who were each shown to their own cookie-making station which contained a set of tools, pre-made dough, pre-made white icing, food coloring, and cookie decorations. At that point, both experimental manipulations occurred and all participants proceeded in making their cookies. After completing the cookie-making process, participants completed a survey instrument that contained the dependent variables of interest: competence, autonomy, and task enjoyment.

The results reveal an interaction between the two constraints (instructions and target outcome) on task enjoyment, such that participants reported the highest levels of task enjoyment when a full set of instructions was provided without a target outcome. To better understand this interaction, we performed mediation tests which revealed that perceived competence fully mediated and perceived autonomy partially mediated the effect. When instructions were provided without a target outcome, perceived competence was at its highest. Perceived autonomy was also high under these conditions, and the relatively high levels of both of these factors resulted in the greatest enjoyment. Those receiving no target outcome and a set of instructions had both the ability to successfully follow task guidance (competence) and the freedom to create an individualized design (autonomy).

The first experimental study assumed no level of prior experience in the study participants, and through randomization, miti-
gated any effects that such differences would have on motivation and enjoyment. However, prior skill levels are likely to have an important influence, not only on one’s likelihood of purchasing a creative product, but also on the likelihood of enjoying the experience offered. Thus, the second experimental study examined the influence of skill level and one constraint (target outcome) on motivation and enjoyment. In this second study, all participants were provided with a full set of instructions. Target outcome was manipulated between-subjects, and prior baking skill was measured and subsequently dichotomized to create a high and a low skill group. The task and procedure was largely the same as that described in the first experimental study.

The results from this second study revealed that prior skill level may be a critical segmentation variable for manufacturers of creativity products. Those participants with low skill levels were able to achieve levels of perceived competence and task enjoyment comparable to those experienced by the high skill participants when a target outcome was dictated. Under these conditions, people of all skill levels had similar perceptions of task difficulty. For those with high skill levels, however, perceptions of competence and autonomy declined significantly when a target outcome was specified and consequently, task enjoyment declined as well.

While the study of creativity has received growing attention, Sternberg and Dess (2001) note that “we do not know enough about this important psychological process” (p. 332). Certainly this statement also applies to our understanding of consumers’ experiences during and motivations underlying creative tasks. While restricted in its scope, our research is designed to initiate a more thorough examination of consumers’ creative experiences.

References

“The Eye’s Mind and the Mind’s Eye: Impact of Overt Visual Attention on Creative Thinking”
Baba Shiv and Monica Wadhwa

“Eyes cannot be held responsible when the mind does the seeing”…Publius Syrus

Scanning our visual environment is an activity, which human beings engage in most of our waking lives. As consumers, we constantly scan our market-environment for information. Furthermore, depending on the size of the visual field, scanning the market environment might involve either a broad or a narrow scope of overt attention. For instance, one could shop for a particular wine (say, Merlot) from an online wine-market with all the wines clustered in a narrow visual area, thereby requiring a narrow scope of overt attention. Or, one could shop for the same wine from an online market with all the wines widespread in a broad visual area, which would require a broad scope of overt-attention. Take another example, that of watching a movie on a weekend. One could watch a movie on a 17-inch TV screen, which would require focusing on a narrow visual area, or one could watch it on a 50-inch TV screen, which would entail focusing on a broad visual area. A question that arises is, would scanning a broad visual field versus a narrow visual field to search for a wine, or watching a movie on a 50-inch rather than on a 17-inch screen make one more creative in a subsequent task of coming up with creative gift ideas for a friend? We posed this question in a short survey to twenty consumers. All the survey respondents replied to this question in the negative, suggesting that based on common intuition, scanning the environment in one task should not impact creativity on a subsequent unrelated task.

Contrary to the common intuition, however, we argue that the way we scan our consumer environment can impact our creativity on a subsequent unrelated task. Specifically, we propose that a broad scope of overt attention can broaden the scope of covert attention, which, in turn can bolster creativity on a subsequent task. Our predictions are consistent with literature on visual perception, which suggests that the mechanisms underlying perceptual and conceptual attention are high correlated (Grosbras and Paus 2002; Kosslyn 1980). Furthermore, research on creativity suggests that a broad versus a narrow scope of internal attention is likely to bolster creativity (Mednick 1962). Thus, drawing upon the two streams of research, creativity and visual perception, we hypothesize that a broad overt attention associated with scanning a broad visual field is likely to enhance the covert breadth of attention, which can be beneficially applied to a subsequent consumer creativity task.

The results from our three studies support our predictions. In study-1, we utilized a movie-consumption (movie clips from the movie Top-Gun) task. Specifically, we manipulated the overt scope of attention by manipulating the size of the screen on which participants watched the movie. In the broad overt-attention, respondents watched the movie on a 50-inch screen, while in the narrow overt-attention respondents watched the movie on a 17-inch screen. Consistent with our predictions, respondents in the broad overt-attention condition generated more creative ideas than those in the narrow overt-attention condition. More interestingly, those in the broad overt-attention condition drew gift ideas from a significantly broader range of product categories than those in narrow overt-attention.

We replicated our results of study-1 in study-2 using a different consumption scenario. In study-2, respondents engaged in an online wine search task, and thereafter participated in the creative gift ideas task. Respondents were asked to search for Merlot wine from an online wine-market containing ten different wines. We manipulated overt attention by manipulating the size of the wine market. In the broad overt-attention condition, the wines were scattered across the screen covering the entire 15-inch display, while in the narrow overt-attention condition, all the wines appeared in the center of the screen in a small circle. Thereafter, as in study-1, all respondents participated in the creative gift-idea task. As in study-1, those in the broad overt-attention condition generated more creative ideas and drew ideas from a significantly broader range of product categories than those in narrow overt-attention condition. These results suggest that overt-attention impacts covert-attention, thereby impacting creativity on a subsequent task.

Our exposition thus far suggests that the breadth of covert attention with its concomitant effects on creativity is influenced by the overt attention associated with the size of the external visual field. Specifically, we suggest that the broad scope of overt attention bolsters the breadth of covert attention, which can be beneficially applied to a subsequent consumer creativity task. If our exposition is valid, then narrowing covert attention by asking respondents to restrict eye-movement and focus on one object in the scene versus focusing on the entire scene during the external attention task should attenuate the visual field effects on creativity in the broad-overt attention condition. This logic formed the basis to provide stronger evidence for our conceptualization in experiment 3. In experiment-3, respondents engaged in a car race task. Respondents were shown cartoon-car race clips on either an 8-inch or a 30-inch screen. Half of the respondents were made to restrict eye-movement by asking them to focus on a specific car in the
center of the screen, while others were asked to pay attention to all the cars on the screen. Consistent with our predictions, we show that in the broad-overt attention condition, the effects of scope of overt-attention on subsequent creativity task were attenuated when respondents were asked to restrict eye-motion. However, restricting eye movement did not impact performance on the subsequent creativity task in the narrow overt-attention condition.

Our results from the three studies suggest that a broad overt attention associated with scanning a broad visual field as opposed to narrow overt attention associated with scanning a narrow visual field enhances the scope of covert attention, which can be beneficially applied to a subsequent consumer creativity task. Our results have important implications for marketers’ merchandising strategies. In these studies, we manipulated broad versus narrow visual attention using three different strategies—a movie consumption task, an online wine market task and a car-race task. However, broad versus narrow visual attention can be activated using various in-store strategies such as store placement. Moreover, a lot of time retailers end up with an overstock of goods that they put on sale. It is likely that just manipulating the size of display could help consumers think of more creative uses for such items and therefore buy more of the assorted on-sale items.

References
The Process by Which Brand Committed Consumers Evaluate Competitive Brands: The Case for Similarity and Dissimilarity Testing

Sekar Raju, University at Buffalo, USA
H. Rao Unnava, Ohio State University, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Most research on brand commitment has focused on how people defend their attitudes when faced with information that undermines their attitudinal position. However, the effects of attitudinal commitment may not be limited to mounting defenses only when an individual’s attitude is challenged. As Chaiken, Liberman and Eagly (1989) observe, individuals not only resist information that is counter to their preferred positions, but may also actively undermine information that “supports non-preferred positions.” The process by which committed consumers evaluate competitive brands even when those brands do not attack one’s preferred brand is studied in this research. Specifically, the cognitive processes that are involved in generating the bias is examined.

When asked to make a judgment about an object, it is not made in isolation, but is made with reference to some other object or a standard. We first argue that high commitment consumers will choose the brand that they are committed to as the comparison standard while low commitment consumers are more likely to select an exemplar, or a prototype as the standard (See Raghunathan and Irwin 2001).

Next, since low commitment consumers are not ‘attached’ to any one brand they are likely to be more ‘inclusive’ in their focus while high commitment consumers are ‘exclusive’ in their intent since their focus is on preserving the existing brand attachment and have a reason to limit their consideration set. This inclusive versus exclusive focus of low versus high commitment consumers should translate to how they evaluate an advertised brand. Low commitment consumers, because of their interest in including other brands, will tend to look at the similarities between the advertised brand and their current set of preferred brands. On the other hand, high commitment consumers, because of their interest in excluding other brands, will focus on the differences between the advertised brand and their preferred brand. These differences in the type of processing that an advertised brand is subjected to will translate into differences in attitudes toward the brand for high versus low commitment consumers. The focus on similarities will make low commitment consumers assimilate the advertised brand toward their preferred brand (assuming the advertisement message is strong and persuasive). The focus on differences will make the high commitment consumers contrast the advertised brand away from their preferred brand (e.g., Mussweiler 2003). Three studies are reported that examine these predictions.

In the first study, the objective was to show that consumers who are more versus less committed to a brand will rate a new competitive brand differently due to differences in the level of similarity or dissimilarity they focus on. As expected, when provided an advertisement for a new brand, high commitment participants seemed to generate more dissimilar thoughts while low commitment consumers seemed to generate more similarity thoughts.

In the second study, a more specific test for similarity/dissimilarity testing was adopted. It was argued that if both high and low commitment consumers are instructed to focus on the similarities between their preferred brand and the advertised brand, the effect of the instructions on low commitment consumers should be marginal because they already focus on the similarities, but the effect of the instructions on high commitment consumers should be greater because it changes the nature of their processing and makes them focus more on the similarities between the two brands. The focus on similarities should lead the high commitment consumers to report greater similarity between the advertised and their preferred brand than they would do in the absence of such instructions. Thus, compared to a control condition, high commitment consumers who are instructed to focus on the similarities between an advertised brand and their preferred brand would report greater similarity between the two brands and more positive attitudes toward the advertised brand, whereas there would be minimal effect of such instructions on low commitment consumers. The results of this study confirmed these expectations.

Finally, the third study was conducted to test the proposition that high commitment individuals invoke their preferred brand as the standard while low commitment individuals invoke either an exemplar or prototype as the standard for comparison. Using a priming manipulation and argumentation similar to that we employed in study 2 we find that high commitment individuals have a more positive evaluation of the advertised brand when asked to focus on the differences between an advertised brand and a less preferred brand (rather than their most preferred, and therefore committed brand) However, since low commitment individuals are more inclusive and use an exemplar or prototype brand for comparison purposes, having them focus on the differences between a less preferred brand and the advertised brand had a less effect on their brand evaluations.

These set of studies suggest that committed consumers are more likely to invoke their preferred brand and focus on how the advertised brand is different from it. This process, we find, results in committed individuals contrasting the advertised brand away from their preferred brand, and thus lower their evaluations. On the other hand, we find that less committed individuals’ focus is on the similarities between the advertised brand and the brand they invoke. Due to the focus on similarities, less committed individuals are more likely to assimilate the advertised brand towards the brand that comes to their mind, and thus generate more positive evaluations.

While Ahluwalia (2000) found that high commitment consumers employ various biased processing mechanisms to counter information that attacks their attitudes, it appears that the biased processing mechanisms that are employed by high commitment consumers are different when faced with information about competitive brands. When faced with an advertisement for a competitive brand, high commitment consumers instinctively appear to adopt a ‘rejection’ mode of processing where they are seeking out ways to undermine the brand. This is accomplished primarily by contrasting the advertised brand away from one’s preferred brand by focusing on how the new brand is different from their preferred brand.

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