Brand Names and Transitive Implicit Associations

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Consumer research addressing information processing occurring at implicit levels has been aided by new methods for assessing the strength of specific implicit associations. One such method, the IAT, is used to test the possibility of an implicit association transitivity property produced through conceptual (Study 1) and perceptual (Study 2) fluency. In Study 1, the tested name represents both the brand name of a “party”-related product and the mascot of a major university. After incidental exposure to the brand name and logo, subsequent implicit associations of the university with the “party” concept emerged among subjects familiar with the university and product category. In Study 2, a brand name was chosen along with perceptually similar concepts that could trigger different valence connotations depending on context. After incidental exposure to these concepts under different priming valence, subsequent implicit associations of the brand name and the valence suggested by prime (“good” or “bad”) emerged among subjects familiar with the brand.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Early cognitive psychology theories describing human memory knowledge as a network of associated concepts have been recently complemented by methodological advances enabling the assessment of the strength of these pairs of associations at implicit levels. This research pursues the possibility of an association transitivity property for two seemingly unrelated concepts that share a brand name or attribute. Two experiments are described proposing that even incidental exposure to a proxy conceptually or perceptually similar to the common concept is a sufficient condition for this transitivity to occur.

Mere exposure research has shown that individuals often engage in learning without explicitly allocating cognitive resources for this purpose. Moreover, they often build positively valenced affective associations with incidentally or even subliminally encountered stimuli, phenomena conceptually captured within the mere exposure paradigm (Zajonc 1980). Although knowledge elaboration involves associating new information with knowledge already stored in memory (Greenwald and Leavitt 1984), consumers often assess the validity of advertising claims without much elaboration. Even when individuals are aware of the non-diagnosticsity of this mere-exposure based strategy, they are still influenced by the fluency emanating from initial exposure (Jacoby et al. 1989).

Not only does mere exposure cause low-involvement learning, but also–more powerfully–mere exposure to a brand name or product package may produce more favorable attitudes toward the brand even when the consumer does not recollect the initial exposure. Janiszewski (1993) proposes that during incidental exposure “there is a feature analysis, memory access, implicit memory formation, and perceptual construction.” The author finds empirical evidence suggesting that the feature analysis may be automatic and independent of the operations associated with attentive processing (Janiszewski 1993). It is concluded that perceptual fluency created via exposure brings about familiarity and—in the absence of active recognition—this is sufficient to impact consumer attitudes.

Several arguments exist for maintaining the distinctiveness of explicit and implicit techniques as memory and association measures that capture relationships between knowledge structures. For example, research by Wagner, Gabrieli, and Verfaellie (1997) addresses the fact that dual-process theories of recognition posit that a perceptual familiarity process contributes to both explicit recognition and implicit perceptual memory. Moreover, in a consumer context, Holden and Vanhuele (1999) show that a single exposure to fictitious brand names is sufficient to create the impression—one day later—that these brands actually existed. The authors argue that measurement of explicit memory of marketing communications may understate their influence, and implicit measures are better equipped to capture it (Holden and Vanhuele 1999). The present research makes use of one specific implicit measure—the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald et al. 1998).

Are all individuals equally susceptible to the kind of priming necessary to build implicit associations? Musen, Szerlip, and Szerlip (1999) used an experimental paradigm wherein implicit memory was tested after priming subjects with words, novel shapes, non-words, and colors. New-association priming occurred between words and colors but not between abstract shapes and colors or between non-words and colors, suggesting that new-association priming occurs for familiar but not for unfamiliar stimuli (Musen et al. 1999). An immediate extension of this work to our case suggests that consumer familiarity with each of the to-be-associated concepts is necessary before novel implicit relationships are constructed.

Based on the previous theoretical accounts from both cognitive and consumer psychology, it was hypothesized that mere or incidental exposure is a sufficient source of fluency to produce the emergence of novel implicit associations of concepts, but only if individuals are familiar with the respective concept category. In the first case, a specific brand name was proposed as the concept that mediates the novel relationship, while in the second case the newly formed relationship involved brand name associations created via perceptually fluent concepts

In Study 1, a concept was chosen that represented both the brand name of a “party”–related product and the mascot of a major American university. After incidental exposure to the brand name and logo, subsequent implicit associations of the specific university with the “party” concept (relative to a comparable other university) emerged among subjects familiar with both the university and brand categories. Furthermore, these post-priming implicit associations actually reversed the pattern of pre-priming explicit relative evaluations of the two colleges in terms of their reputation as party schools.

In Study 2, a brand name was chosen with perceptually similar concepts that could trigger different valence connotations depending on the context. After incidental exposure to these concepts under different perceptual priming valence, subsequent implicit associations of the brand name and the valence suggested by prime (“good” or “bad”) emerged among subjects familiar with the brand in question.

The present work contributes to our understanding of implicit cognition and attitude formation from a dual conceptual perspective. It shows that incidental exposure to brand names is powerful enough to produce novel implicit associations among individuals susceptible to such occurrence. It also suggests that incidental exposure to valenced concepts that are perceptually similar to brand names are sufficient to trigger implicit associations of brands with primed valence attributes. The current research also quantifies the above-mentioned priming power of conceptual priming, as the processes involved were shown to effectively change implicit associations from their original direction in the explicit measure to their reverse image in the implicit measure. The critical role of type of measurement becomes apparent, and this article adds to the growing body of cognitive and consumer research literature addressing issues of dissociation in terms of knowledge representation and assessment.

REFERENCES


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