Special Session Summary    Advances in the Study of Creative Cognition in Consumer Behavior
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SESSION OVERVIEW

Since Guilford’s (1950) landmark presidential address to the American Psychological Association, creativity has been an integral part of psychology, particularly in the domain of problem solving. A great deal of this work has focused on what is termed, “creative cognition” or how various thought processes and abilities impact creative outcomes (Finke, Ward and Smith 1991).

By contrast, research on creativity in consumer behavior is scant. Consumer researchers have focused almost exclusively on understanding the ways in which consumers learn about, construct preferences for, and choose among existing product alternatives. It is presumed that marketers identify and provide for consumer needs with limited regard for the possibility that consumers may meet needs creatively. Yet in many situations consumer needs are specific and unique, requiring the individual to play an integral part in manufacturing a novel solution to a given consumption problem. Examples include the need for an appropriate menu for a dinner party, for the “right” business casual wardrobe for a conference, for an updated room decor, or for a romantic week-long vacation. Across a variety of domains, consumers often act as their own agent of change, sourcing necessary components and assembling the parts to meet specific goals. More than 20 years ago, Hirschman (1980, p. 283) noted this deficiency in consumer research: “investigations of creativity have not focused on its potential applicability to everyday consumption activities.” Unfortunately, this situation remains.

In the interest integrating creativity more fully into consumer research, we brought together three papers that examined theoretical, practical, and methodological aspects of creative cognition in a consumption context. The first paper presented by Darren Dahl and Page Moreau examines the role of constraints on generative and exploratory thinking by consumers in the context of new product ideation. This work also extends into the motivational and affective aspects of creative thought, considering not only the quality of consumers’ creative thoughts but also their enjoyment for the task.

The second paper presented by Tom Ward also used consumer product ideation as the platform of investigation, but focuses on the impact of abstract versus concrete thinking on creative outcomes. Finally, the third paper presented by Jim Burroughs and David Mick examines the role of metaphorical thinking ability in creative consumption. They reported on the development of a new instrument for assessing metaphorical thinking ability, including an initial test of the instrument in a consumer problem-solving context.

To date, understanding of the nature and role of creativity in consumer behavior is limited. The three papers presented are designed to address a different aspect of this deficit. Dahl and Moreau’s work provides much needed theory on the role of environmental conditions (constraints in particular) in impacting creative consumption. Ward’s research harbors practical implications for the types of thinking that should be engendered to optimize creative outcomes in areas such as new product design. Burroughs and Mick’s work makes more of a methodological contribution, providing a tool for assessing an important construct within the realm of creativity. Combined, it is hoped that this research will stimulate greater appreciation for, and interest in, the study of an undeniably important aspect of human functioning.

“Manufacturing the Solution: The Role of Constraints in Consumer Creativity”
Darren Dahl, University of British Columbia
Page Moreau, University of Colorado

In this research, we examine the influence of constraints on the creative process and its outcomes. Three studies are undertaken to this end. Our first study examines the influence of input constraints on the type of information processing consumers undertake in a creative task. Specifically, we examine the effect of (1) restricting the parts available and (2) mandating the number of parts on the strategies used by consumers in creating a new toy. Using protocol data, we trace consumer’s information processing strategies and show that both types of input constraints promote the use of more generative and exploratory thinking. A set of professional designers rated the creativity of the toys developed in the task, and we find a strong, positive relationship between the rated creativity and the degree of generative and exploratory thinking employed.

Using the same design as the first, the second study examines the influence of the same two input constraints on the consumers’ subjective experience during the task. Specifically, we examine the influence of constraints on different forms of motivation, and we find that when the constraints are operating, consumers enjoy the task less and are less likely to have their motivational needs (i.e., autonomy and competence) met. Thus, while the constraints we employed improved the quality of the outcomes of the creative task, they reduced the quality of the consumer’s experience. We know from the success of retailers who support consumers’ creative endeavors (e.g., Michaels, Lowe’s, Martha Stewart), however, that offering constrained creative opportunities is rewarded in the marketplace.

To better understand this apparent contradiction, it’s important to take a closer look at the types of constraints operating. In the first two studies, the constraints employed involved the inputs used by participants when constructing their new idea. But there were no constraints on how these inputs were used or combined to form the outcome. Hence, an almost infinite number of solutions could still be constructed. Would constraining the process or the outcome influence perceptions of autonomy and competence differently than constraining the inputs? To answer this question, we ran a third study in a more realistic consumer situation, and we manipulated whether or not the outcome and the process were constrained. Specifically, we had participants bake cookies under a variety of task conditions. Half of the participants were required to make a specific cookie and to decorate it in a specific way: the other half were simply required to make a cookie. To manipulate constraints on the process, we varied the amount of instruction provided. Finally, we measured baking experience, hypothesizing it as a moderator of the effects of the constraints. All three factors interacted to influence consumers’ subjective experience.

“Strategic Approach and the Degree of Novelty in New Idea Generation”
Thomas B. Ward, University of Alabama

In this research I examine the role of alternative idea generation strategies in consumer creativity and new product ideation. In particular, I focus on the influence of abstract versus concrete...
thought on the originality and acceptability of ideas people develop for new sports and new forms of entertainment. Previous research has shown that the majority of individuals who are asked to develop new ideas for a given domain (e.g., novel fruit or tools) begin by retrieving highly accessible, specific domain instances, whereas a minority begin by considering more abstract forms of information. The latter produce ideas that are rated as more original, suggesting that more product innovation might be obtained through abstract as opposed to concrete strategies. In the present studies I asked whether the additional originality afforded by abstract approaches might be obtained at a cost to the acceptability of the ideas. Can too much originality negatively impact acceptability?

For the domain of sports, participants performed one of two separate tasks. Fifty-eight participants listed known instances of sports and 87 used their imagination to developed ideas for new sports and then reported on the factors that had influenced their creations. The lists of known instances were used to determine the most accessible instances in the domain (e.g., baseball was highly accessible as indicated by the fact that it was listed by 56 of 58 participants, whereas shot put was listed by only 2). The new sport designs and reports of influential factors were used to determine which participants had relied on known instances in designing their novel sport and which sport instances were used most often. Consistent with previous research, the majority of participants (69%) in the imagination task reported retrieving specific known instances of sports (e.g., baseball), whereas the minority reported thinking about more abstract considerations (e.g., the purpose of competition in sport). Accessibility of known instances was influential in that there was a strong positive correlation between the number of participants who listed a given sport as a known instance and the number who used that sport as the basis for their novel creation, r=.78. Also consistent with previous research, the novel sports designed by those who retrieved specific known sport instances, were rated as significantly less original than those developed by participants who accessed more abstract forms of knowledge. However, they also received higher acceptability scores, in particular, ratings of how likely it is that people would want to play the new sport. In addition, there was a significant negative correlation between ratings of originality and ratings of the likelihood people would play the sport, r=-.23. Similar results were obtained in a study that used forms of entertainment as the knowledge domain.

The results suggest that there is a balance between the originality of new product ideas and their likelihood of being deemed acceptable, and this balance is directly influenced by the strategy used in developing the ideas. Abstraction increases originality, but can decrease acceptability. When more novelty is desirable in a new product, accessing abstract principles could be most appropriate; when more familiarity is the goal, retrieval and modification of specific known exemplars may be more effective.

“Development of a Test of Metaphoric Thinking Ability and Initial Validation through a Creativity Experiment”

James E. Burroughs, University of Virginia
David Glen Mick, University of Virginia

In this research we develop and test an instrument for assessing metaphoric thinking ability (the MTA—SC; see Appendix). Metaphors are fundamental in human thought (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Because they take abstract, remote and unfamiliar concepts and relate them through the concrete and familiar, they are also indispensable in the creative process. Cognitively speaking, they help connect solutions from previously disparate domains to new problem contexts (Runco 1991). Unfortunately, empirical research on the relation between creativity and metaphor has been hampered by a lack of valid methods for assessing metaphoric thinking ability. Moreover, the few instruments that do exist are beset by a number of limitations. They are either applicable to a limited population (i.e. children; Pollio and Pollio 1979), cumbersome to administer and/or score (see e.g., Barron 1988), or they explicitly call for the use of metaphors in completing the task (see e.g., Helstrup 1988). This latter situation is problematic for creativity research because it is essential that individuals be allowed to freely access metaphors in structuring thought. Given these limitations, we sought to develop a new instrument that would be useful for adults, easy to administer and score, and would allow metaphor to naturally represent itself in thought.

We followed standard scale development procedures (i.e. generation of multiple items, analysis and paring of items, etc.) and discovered a sentence completion task worked best. Respondents are provided with sentence stems that can then be completed either literally or metaphorically. For example, one truncate is, “Helping someone is...” Responses are then independently scored on three levels. The lowest score is assigned for literal completions, such as, “Helping someone is the right thing to do.” Intermediate scores are assigned for statements which are metaphorical in content, but represent “dead” metaphors (i.e. they have become integrated into common use in the language). An example is, “Helping someone is to lend a hand.” Finally, the highest score is assigned for statements that are metaphorical and generative in content. For example, one of our respondents said, “Helping someone is to make a deposit in the bank of Karma”.

Two validity checks were undertaken on the new instrument. First, a known-groups validity check was conducted using copywriters at Grey advertising in New York. Confirming our expectations, these copywriters scored significantly higher on the MTA—SC than respondents drawn from the general population. Second, the nomological validity of the test was assessed. Respondents in an experiment were given a basic consumption problem to solve (facing a social situation of being late for a dinner when they discover their shoes are scuffed and they are out of polish). The results indicate that individuals higher in metaphoric thinking ability produced more creative solutions to this problem. We hope that this new instrument opens the way for new research on metaphor and creativity.

REFERENCES


Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson (1980), Metaphors We Live By, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
