Special Session Summary  Implicit Measures of Consumer Judgments and Choice

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[to cite]:

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Traditionally, consumer behavior research has characterized consumers as deliberate decision makers and has tended to neglect the role of unconscious or automatic processes on judgment and choice (Bargh, 2002). An important challenge in consumer research is to develop a greater understanding of the relation between conscious and unconscious processes in the consumer environment. While consumer researchers are familiar with the concept of implicit attitudes, this session was assembled with the goal of explicitly examining both the theoretical and applied issues concerning the use of implicit measures of attitudes in consumer research.

The first paper by Dominika Maison, Anthony Greenwald and Ralph Bruin reported the results of two studies designed examine the relation between implicit and explicit measures of consumer ethnocentrism. Consumer ethnocentrism (CE) is defined as conscious preference of own country products compared to foreign products (Watson & Wright, 2000; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). The results of two studies showed that on explicit measures subjects preferred foreign products, but on implicit measures they preferred Polish products. Moreover, people who had weaker explicit preference for foreign products had stronger implicit preference for Polish products, which can produce dissociation between implicit and explicit attitudes.

In “The Relation between Implicit and Explicit Attitudes and Spontaneous Choice,” Melanie Dempsey and Andrew Mitchell examine the predictability of implicit attitudes in a spontaneous choice situation. Implicit attitudes toward two fictitious brands of pens were created using a conditioning task in which participants are unaware of the contingency relationships between the CS (target pens) and the US (affective stimuli). Conflicting explicit attitudes were also created based on beliefs about the attributes of the pens. They find that participants who had formed a strong implicit attitude toward a fictitious brand of pen and were not instructed to form an explicit attitude were more likely to choose the pens associated with the implicit attitude. They also find support for their hypothesis that implicit attitudes are correlated with intuitive or affective processing of information.

Alternative perspectives of implicit attitudes and their relation with explicit attitudes is focus of the third paper “Alternative Theoretical Positions on Implicit Attitudes.” Paul Herr, Andrew Mitchell and Melanie Dempsey provide insight into the theoretical basis of implicit attitudes and discuss three conceptual views of implicit attitudes. The first position discussed is based on a context independent view of implicit attitudes. In this view, implicit attitudes are the “true” attitude, while explicit attitudes are subject to context effects. The second position is a dual model of attitudes in which different evaluations of the same attitude object exist in memory (e.g., Wilson et al., 2000). The third theoretical perspective of implicit attitudes draws on the work from dual information processing theory (e.g., Epstein, 1994; Sloman, 1996; Smith & DeCoster, 1999). The parallels between this body of research and dissociations between implicit and explicit attitudes were discussed.

Whereas there is a long history of consumer research on explicit attitudes, implicit attitudes have only recently received attention. Together these papers show that theoretical and empirical research on implicit attitudes is of great importance to understanding the impact of environmental stimuli on consumer attitudes and behavior.

“Implicit Consumer Ethnocentrism—an Example of Dissociation between Explicit and Implicit Preference”
Dominika Maison, University of Warsaw
Anthony G. Greenwald, University of Washington
Ralph H. Bruin, Medical Data Management Corp

Consumer ethnocentrism (CE) is defined as a conscious preference of own country products compared to foreign products (Watson & Wright, 2000; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). CE can have different backgrounds: a) cognitive—when people believe that products produced in their own country are better (“Our products have better quality”); b) affective—when people have a positive affective reaction toward own country products (“I love American products”); c) ideological (normative)—when people believe that it is appropriate to purchase products manufactured in their home country (“It is better for the American economy to buy American products”).

CE is observed in many countries. However, in economically developed countries consumers have stronger preferences toward own country products than in under-developed countries. It is explained that in under-developed countries people often have experience with poorer quality of their own country’s products compared to foreign brands. This situation can lead to dissociation between implicit and explicit attitudes and it can produce internal conflict between automatic preference based on emotions and rational judgment based on observation and experience.

The goal of two studies was to explore explicit and implicit preferences toward foreign vs. local products and their relation to behavior. In the first study we measured attitude toward Polish vs. foreign brands of cigarettes (Polish cigarettes are considered to have lower quality than foreign brands). Participants (102 college students; 37 smoking; 65 not smoking) participated in an IAT study (Greenwald, McGhee & Schwartz, 1998) where stimuli were names of Polish (e.g. Sobieskie, Carmen) vs. Western cigarettes brands (e.g. Marlboro, Camel), and completed a questionnaire about their opinion about different brands of products. On explicit measures (questionnaire), subjects preferred foreign brands, but on implicit measures (IAT) they preferred Polish cigarettes. This dissociation was stronger among non-smokers than among smokers. However even though smokers smoked foreign brands and preferred foreign brands (explicit measure), the implicit measurements showed a slight preference for Polish brands.

The second study investigated implicit consumer ethnocentrism toward multiple product categories. In seeking to understand CE, we explored its relation toward explicit consumer ethnocentrism (measured by CATESCALE, Shimp & Sharma, 1987), explicit preference of Polish vs. foreign products, and quality perception of Polish products. Participants (97 college students) completed an IAT task, where stimuli were Polish vs. foreign brand names in different product categories, and filled in two questionnaires. The first questionnaire was administered before the IAT task; it concerned explicit attitudes toward brands and products. The second questionnaire (CATECALE) was completed after the IAT test. The results showed a pattern similar to that obtained in the first study: on explicit measures subjects preferred foreign products, but on implicit measures they preferred Polish products. Furthermore,
subjects who had weaker explicit preferences for foreign products had stronger implicit preferences for Polish products. No relation was observed between implicit consumer ethnocentrism (IAT) and explicit ethnocentrism as measured by the CATESCALE.

“The Relation between Implicit and Explicit Attitudes and Spontaneous Choice”
Melanie A. Dempsey, University of Toronto
Andrew A. Mitchell, University of Toronto

The recent surge of interest in implicit social cognition has been accompanied by an increase in the use of indirect or implicit attitude measures (e.g., Fazio et al., 1986; Greenwald et al., 1998; Nosek & Banaji, 2001). But as Bargh (2002) and others have noted, the consumer behavior field has not directed a great deal of attention to the substantial role of nonconscious processes in consumer judgment and behavior or under what conditions it may influence behavior. The present research was designed to address this void. We examine the effect of implicit attitudes that develop from a conditioning procedure on subsequent choice behavior when participants are presented with conflicting product attribute information.

Olson & Fazio (2001) have developed a conditioning procedure in which attitudinal conditioning effects are found on implicit attitude measures. The appeal of this procedure is that subjects are exposed to the CS and US in a manner more consistent with real life advertising (paired together). In our studies we borrowed the procedure as outlined in Olson & Fazio (2001) with slight modifications. The target conditioned stimulus consisted of two fictitious brands of pens and the filler images were additional fictitious products that undergraduates would be familiar with (e.g., deodorant, sunglasses, and toothpaste). The objective of the first two preliminary studies was to replicate previous findings using fictitious brands of consumer products. We found a main effect of target valence, where the pen that had been paired with positive images was rated more positively than the pen that had been paired with negative images on implicit attitude measures (IAT; Greenwald et al., 1998).

After the target pens had been conditioned, participants were presented with attribute information for both brands of pens in the form of print advertisements that were written to contradict the earlier formed valence. The instructions for evaluating the ads were written to encourage some subjects to form an attitude on-line (at the time the judgment relevant information was presented), while others were not expected to form an attitude at the time of exposure to the attribute information (memory condition) (Hastie & Park, 1986). Subsequently, subjects were required to choose between the two fictitious brands of pens. We found that those participants who were not instructed to form an attitude toward a brand during exposure to product information were more likely to choose the positively conditioned pen over the pen described by the more positive attributes. If we assume a majority of advertising is processed by consumers under low levels of involvement, then our findings have important consumer behavior implications.

We also investigated the hypothesis that lower order perceptual associations such as affect or feelings generated may influence attitudes measured by implicit measures. Epstein’s cognitive-experiential self-theory (CEST; 1994) suggests that people adapt to their environments through one of two conceptual systems—the preconscious/experiential or the conscious/rational. Whereas the experiential system makes connections through associations, the rational system does so through logical considerations. According to CEST, information processed in the experiential mode is affective in nature. If implicit attitudes are more susceptible to affective or emotional influences, then there may be reliable differences in the tendency for individuals to form implicit attitudes. We administered the affective orientation scale developed by Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield (1990) as a measure of individual difference in reliance on emotions/feelings versus logic/facts in decision-making. The results show that implicit attitudes (IAT and evaluative priming) were stronger for participants who scored higher in affective orientation, supporting our prediction.

This present research makes important contributions to the literature. This is the first study to our knowledge that demonstrates that implicit preferences towards a product can persist in the face of conflicting information and influence choice behavior. Additionally, we provide preliminary evidence that implicit measures of attitude tap a database of knowledge that is affective in nature.

“Alternative Theoretical Positions on Implicit Attitudes”
Paul M. Herr, University of Colorado
Andrew A. Mitchell, University of Toronto
Melanie A. Dempsey, University of Toronto

There has been considerable interest recently in implicit measures of social cognition (e.g., Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Much of this interest has focused on the measurement of implicit attitudes. It has been argued that these measures of attitude allow researchers to learn more about attitudes by gaining access to the unconscious mind (Banaji, 2001). While a variety of different procedures have been used for measuring implicit attitudes, most research has been conducted using one of two different procedures (Fazio & Olson, 2003). The first is an evaluative priming task which assesses the automatic activation of attitudes from memory and was proposed by Fazio, Sanbonmatsu, Powell and Kardes (1986). The second is the Implicit Association Test (IAT) which was developed by Greenwald et al. (1998). The evaluative priming task assesses what is automatically activated from memory upon presentation of the attitude object whereas the IAT assesses the strength of association between an attitude object and an attribute dimension. Both procedures use response times to measure implicit attitudes and both yield information about a person’s attitude not yielded by conventional self-report measures.

While there are important methodological differences in the two approaches, here we would like to focus on alternative conceptual views of implicit attitudes and their relationship to explicit attitudes. Basically, there seems to be three positions each with minor variations. The first position is that implicit attitudes are the “true” attitudes, while explicit attitudes are constructed and are subject to context effects. This has been the underlying view of most of the research on stereotypes. An individual’s implicit attitude is their true attitude toward a stereotype, while the explicit attitude represents a politically correct attitude. The argument supporting implicit attitude measures as reflecting the true attitude was that individuals could not “fake” them. This view suggests that both implicit and explicit measures of attitude tap a single construct. Self-reported attitudes are a combination of the implicit attitude and self-presentation.

The second position was put forth by Wilson et al. (2000) who argue for the independence of implicit and explicit attitudes. They propose a dual model of attitudes in which different evaluations of the same attitude object may exist simultaneously in memory. According to this model when an individual has more than one evaluation of the same attitude object, one is activated automatically upon presentation of the stimulus (implicit attitude) and the other requires motivation or capacity to retrieve (explicit attitude). They suggest that when an individual changes their attitude, under some conditions the original attitude is not replaced but remains in memory and can be activated automatically.
The final position draws on models which propose a dual theory of information processing (e.g., Epstein, 1994; Sloman, 1996; Smith & DeCoster; 1999). While there are conceptual differences in these models, they all propose that information is processed through either an associative/experiential mode or one that is rational or rule-based. Associative processing is quick, intuitive and relies on associations that are more perceptual or affective in nature. The rational or rule-based system is conscious, analytical, primarily verbal, and relatively affect-free. There are obvious parallels between these modes of processing and implicit and explicit attitudes.

Currently, dissociations between implicitly and explicitly measured attitudes toward the same attitude object have been predominately explained by either self-presentation concerns or unreliable implicit measures. We argue that the third position holds promise for investigating implicit attitudes in the consumer domain. Smith & DeCosters (1999) suggest that the two processing modes (associative and rule-based) tap separate databases representing knowledge in two distinct formats. While the researchers discuss the implications of their model for explaining dissociations in a number of domains (e.g., implicit/explicit memory), we believe that applying model of dual information processing to consumers’ implicit and explicit attitudes would be insightful. Different evaluations (explicit and implicit attitudes) toward an attitude object might develop simultaneously based on the two systems processing different kinds of information or experience associated with the target object. Implicit attitudes may be more influenced by lower order perceptual associations, whereas explicit attitudes are based on higher order beliefs. According to Epstein (1994), features associated with the experiential system are more concrete and affective in nature because information processed in the experiential route rely more on feelings generated. Therefore we should not be surprised to find explicit and implicit attitudes dissociated even in areas where demand characteristics are not believed to play a role. Understanding the role of perceptual processes on consumers’ implicit attitudes is an important and fruitful area for future research.

References