Mental Rumination: How Unwanted and Recurrent Thoughts Can Perturbate Purchasing Behavior

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Martin and Tesser (1989) proposed a “rumination theory” to describe an unintentional and recurrent cognitive process where the individuals dwell on recurrent negative thoughts despite the absence of immediate environmental cueing. Their motivational approach presents rumination as a counterproductive thinking process triggered by the detection of a perturbation in one’s goal attainment process. This theory has received substantial attention in clinical psychology, but has not been documented in the literature on consumer behavior. Therefore, this paper aims first at synthesizing the current body of research on rumination and second at suggesting directions for research in marketing.

[to cite]:


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http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14953/volumes/v37/NA-37

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This research also adds to the body of research studying the role of public relations in shaping brand equity. We provide a case in which corporate associations built through public relations have an impact on purchase intention (a product level outcome) (Brown and Dacin 1997).

References

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Rumination is a set of long-lasting, recurrent, unwanted, and counter productive thoughts. In clinical psychology, rumination is often mentioned as a consequence of post-traumatic events (Horowitz, 1976) or as an antecedent of depressive disorders (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1996). Martin and Tesser (1989, 1996, 2006) endorse a general view of rumination, removing it from its clinical context. Whereas individuals have many occasions to ruminate in their consumer’s life, especially during their purchase decision process, ruminative thoughts have never been integrated into consumer behavior paradigm. Based on Martin and Tesser’s motivational approach, we will first present rumination, then suggest some avenues for future research.

What is rumination?
In Martin and Tesser’s model, rumination refers to thoughts ‘that recur in the absence of immediate environmental demands requiring the thoughts’ (Martin and Tesser, 1996, p.1). Rumination differs from other thinking processes because:

- It does not only occur once: what is central to rumination is not the content or any other quality of the involved mental activity but the circularity of the process.
- If some situations favor their apparition, ruminative thoughts are unintentional insofar as they revolve in the absence of immediate environmental cueing (Koole et al., 1999).

Put differently, rumination is intrusive, anchored into a temporal dimension, and differs from other thinking processes which often deal with wanted tradeoffs.

Martin and Tesser’s theory is based on one core principle: people’s thoughts are always goal-directed. People continually compare their desired goal to their current states to regulate their behaviors. When a lack of progress towards the goal is perceived, ruminative thoughts are likely to appear (Martin and Tesser, 1996; Scott and McIntosh, 1999). In theory, each interrupted goal can initiate rumination (e.g. to do well on one’s life / to buy a muffin), but the centrality of the goal in the individual’s life defines the duration and the frequency of ruminative thoughts. In Martin and Tesser’s model, emotions can not be considered as antecedents of rumination but as signals which inform the individuals that a major goal is threatened. The failure in problem solving strategies (instrumental thoughts) initiates ruminative thoughts and the emotions that go with them (affective thoughts).
Rumination is divided into 3 dimensions: the emotional valence of the thoughts (negative vs. positive), their temporal orientation (past, present or future) and the polarisation of thoughts (discrepancy focus vs. attainment focus, i.e., definitively non-attained goal vs. lack of progress towards the goal).

Given the intrusion of these recurrent thoughts into consciousness, rumination leads to an important consumption of cognitive resources (Martin and Tesser, 1989) and more specifically to:

- Increases in the intensity and duration of emotions (Martin and Tesser, 1989; Rusting and Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998);
- Lower cognitive performances (Scott and McIntosh, 1999): rumination leads to less awareness and less ability to solve problems (Sukhodolsky, Golub and Cromwell, 2001) and is followed by reduced self-confidence;
- Negatively biased judgments which alter individuals’ choices and make them a) see problems more threatening than they actually are or b) overemphasize negative information related to their experience (Lyubomirsky et al., 1999);
- A need for more temporal resources in decision making situations (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000)

Ruminative thoughts in consumer behavior

We believe that rumination theory offers great potential for the study of consumer behavior, and is particularly relevant to better understand perturbations in the decision making process because:

- Consumption is a goal-oriented activity which leads to problem-solving situations (related to information search on products and/or brands, to prices and promotion, etc.)
- Rumination may arise at two different stages of the purchasing decision process. At the pre-purchase stage, we suggest that rumination is likely to occur when consumers have difficulties to solve the problem they confront (e.g., being unable to choose an Internet provider, fearing the risk of a wrong choice). At the post-purchase stage, rumination may occur when the decision produces undesirable outcomes (e.g., regretting to have subscribed to a non user-friendly Internet service).

The central role played by goals and the temporal dimension of rumination (e.g., pre-choice, post-choice) presents a significant advantage to understand the perturbations which can occur during consumers’ purchase process. In that framework, rumination may play two main roles in the decision making process. Rumination may interact with other variables and moderate some consequences of consumers’ decision making process. It could also be a mediator: rumination could have a direct influence on some emotional states or behaviors. This effect however would occur only and to the extent that rumination takes place. Because it considerably affects consumers’ cognition and affect, rumination could foster unexpected and/or exacerbated behaviors (e.g., revenge; systematic choice deferral; systematic removal of brands from the consideration set of alternatives…). It also allows for the adoption of a different point of view on classical relationships between consumer behavior variables (e.g., satisfaction and repurchase, for example when consumers favor simplified choice reasoning).

In previous research on rumination, data are typically based on self reports using questionnaires or on manipulations designed to influence individual’s thoughts and/or to put them into situations in which higher order goals could be frustrated. We could devise qualitative works and experiments adapted to the context of consumption behavior that would address the following questions: which (unhappy) consumption episodes instigate rumination? To what extent can marketing actions trigger rumination? Will every frustrated consumption goals initiate rumination or only specific high order consumption goals (related to the self, or high involvement product categories)? What is positive rumination (to date there is no research about positive rumination), when does it occur, does it improve one’s image and does it also imply counterintuitive implications (e.g., negative effects, such as choice deferral because consumers do not want the positive thoughts to end…)? At which stage of the purchase process is rumination more likely to occur? How can we prevent consumers from engaging into a rumination process? How can we help companies to reduce the likelihood that their products and/or services (sorting them by categories) will trigger ruminative thoughts? Eventually, are some consumers more likely to ruminate than others?

References

Advancements in Consumer Research (Volume 37) / 787

Ad Avoidance and Brand Devaluation: When What They Don’t See Can Hurt You
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Every day we see thousands of advertisements, yet consumers actively attend to only a small minority of the ads they are exposed to. Most advertising research looks only at what happens after attention to the ad has occurred. While this is obviously important, it may be equally important to understand what happens to the ads that are not attended to, or purposely ignored.

Several advertising researchers have used the mere exposure effect (MEE) to suggest that avoided ads can have positive outcomes for advertisers (Edwards, Li and Lee 2002; Baker 1999). Zajonc (1968) showed that “unreinforced” exposure to novel stimuli increases liking of that stimuli. This is what has been cited in the many applications of MEE to ignored or passively viewed advertising. Indeed, Bornstein (1989) pointed out that advertising, which may be conceptualized as repeated, unreinforced exposures designed to enhance attitude, represents an important application of MEE. However, “unreinforced” implies that no affective response is attached to the stimuli, something that may not be the case in all instances of ad avoidance.

Distractor Devaluation

In opposition to MEE, recent research has found that non-attended objects (distractors) can lead to negative, rather than positive ratings. Raymond, Fenske and Tavassoli (2003) had participants view stimuli and quickly indicate on which side of the page the target stimulus appeared. Participants later rated their affect toward the attended (target) stimulus, the ignored stimulus, or a previously unseen (novel) stimulus. The ignored stimuli were rated lower than either the novel stimuli or the attended stimuli. This shows that attentional state during initial exposure can influence affective response when the stimulus is encountered again. When the stimulus is actively ignored during exposure it can cause a subsequent negative rating. This is referred to as the distracter devaluation effect.

Further studies demonstrated that overtly knowing what not to look at caused an even stronger negative affective association. This shows that top-down processing may create an emotional response, and that attention and emotion may work together to prioritize the processing of stimuli in order to help people accomplish task related goals (Fenske, Raymond and Kunar 2004). When engaged in visual search, it is inefficient to re-search areas or re-attend to items once it has been determined that they are not what is being sought. Thus we tag items as inhibited or negative so as not to process them again. While this is functional for goal-oriented behaviors, it suggests that ads that interrupt or distract from search efforts may actually harm brand ratings.

Motivational relevance

Object-based inhibition is part of a top-down attentional process and is dependent on limited-capacity resources (Olivers and Humphreys 2002). Top-down processing occurs when there is already a goal in mind (e.g. finding that specific book) versus a bottom-up approach where something may gain attention by catching your eye. We are constantly engaged in some sort of bottom-up processing as we scan our environments, but inhibition primarily occurs in goal-directed searches.

Certain items have been shown to be generally prioritized for processing—such as fearful faces or food. These items can be said to elicit motivated attention (e.g. Schupp et al 2004; Lang, Bradley and Cuthbert 1998). Salience can also be related to physiological drive states with increased attention for items related to eating found for participants who abstain from eating compared to those who didn’t (Mogg et al 1998).

Study 1

Study 1 was conducted to determine if a goal-directed (top down) task would create brand devaluation for distracting ads, and if a physiological need state (affecting bottom-up processing) would impact these results. Participants (n=118) viewed 19 webpages that contained food-related news articles and ads (experimenter created). Some ads were repeated while others were included just once. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. Two groups (Task groups) were asked to find specific information on each page. One of these groups had food-related news articles and ads (experimenter created). Some ads were repeated while others were included just once. Participants later rated their affect toward the attended (target) stimulus, the ignored stimulus, or a previously unseen (novel) stimulus. The ignored stimuli were rated lower than either the novel stimuli or the attended stimuli. This shows that attentional state during initial exposure can influence affective response when the stimulus is encountered again. When the stimulus is actively ignored during exposure it can cause a subsequent negative rating. This is referred to as the distracter devaluation effect.

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Findings supported the hypotheses. A significant difference (p<.001) between hungry vs. non-hungry participants emerged. Hungry participants showed no differences between groups on ad liking and trial intent (all p’s>.15 n.s.). However, as predicted, non-hungry participants showed significant differences (in the predicted directions, with the AdsTask group showing the lowest means) for ad liking (repeated ads F(2,57)=3.25, p<.05; non-repeated F(2,57)=3.65, p<.05) and trial intent (repeated F(2,57)=3.90, p<.05; non-repeated F(2,57)=5.97, p<.005). There were no differences between non-hungry groups on liking or trial for the unseen (novel) ads.