The Curious Case of Behavioral Backlash: Nonconscious Reactance to Marketing Slogans

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Marketers rely on an impressive arsenal of persuasion tools, including brands and slogans, in their attempts to influence consumer spending. Consumers know that these tools exist to persuade them, but nevertheless perceive that the persuasive intent of brands is negligible and that of slogans is great. Consequently, while priming with brands produces prime-consistent behavior, priming with slogans produces prime-inconsistent behavior – a behavioral backlash. The behavioral backlash against slogans can increase or decrease spending, depending on the slogan’s message (to incite saving or spending money). Moreover, supraliminal and subliminal priming techniques establish that consumer backlash against slogans occurs without conscious intention or awareness.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

The last two decades of research in social cognition have produced many findings indicating that much of human behavior is driven by factors and processes that operate outside of immediate conscious awareness. For consumer behavior researchers in particular, demonstrations that environmental cues can nonconsciously influence consumer behavior (Chartrand et al. 2008) are both challenging and exciting. Challenging because a world where consumers are exposed to an ever increasing onslaught of marketing cues and primes raises the stakes for researchers trying to understand the processes by which such cues may combine and interact to influence choice and consumption. Exciting because the very idea of a parallel nonconscious goal system opens the door to new directions for research. Previously unexplained behaviors may now find resolution in the context of richer theories of consumer behavior, which recognize and integrate both conscious and nonconscious elements. In this session three papers present insights from second generation research into nonconscious influences of consumer behavior with a particular focus on improving our understanding of the mechanisms by which environmental cues can influence consumers. The papers in the session demonstrate several unexpected ways in which specific marketing-relevant primes influence behavior and explore a method for measuring/diagnosing the relevant goal activations that these primes invoke.

All three papers in this session share a common focus on deepening our theoretical understanding of how marketing-relevant primes can influence downstream consumer behaviors. The first paper, by Laran, Dalton and Andrade, demonstrates unexpected differences between the priming efficacy of sentences, brands, and slogans. In particular, the authors find that slogans, by virtue of their overt persuasive intent, invoke a form of nonconscious reactance that can actually prime behaviors opposite to those intended by the slogan writers. Fascinatingly, this negative priming effect transfers to sentences presented simultaneously with subliminal exposure of the word “slogan”. This result not only reinforces the nonconscious nature of the core effect, but also constitutes initial evidence of the capability of subliminal cues to hijack and modify the meaning of consciously perceived stimuli.

The second paper, by Goldsmith and Dhar, demonstrates an entirely different mechanism by which environmental cues can irrevocably influence consumer behavior. The authors show that when choosing between two goal congruent options, incidental activation of a conflicting goal actually increases choice of the option which most conflicts with the new goal. Thus Goldsmith and Dhar identify circumstances where goal activation can actually invoke behavior that is entirely inconsistent with the goal, a result which they demonstrate is driven by consumers’ desire to justify their choices.

One implication of these first two papers is to provide a salient reminder of the variety of (often unexpected) ways in which peripheral cues can conspire to automatically influence consumer behavior. This presents considerable challenges both to researchers concerned with identifying possible priming effects in their stimuli and for practitioners desirous of fully understanding the totality of possible effects caused by their marketing efforts. The final paper, by Carlson et al., speaks directly to this issue by presenting evidence that goals automatically invoked by peripheral cues, and which operate outside of conscious awareness, can actually be measured. By interrupting choice tasks before they are complete (where goal activation levels should be maximal), and using sensitive measures, these authors demonstrate the important finding that it is actually possible to measure the activation of goals invoked by supraliminal primes, subliminal primes, or the choice context itself. The methodological ability to measure online goal activation opens the possibility of testing a range of theories that hypothesize the role of specific goals, like Goldsmith and Dhar’s goal of justifying choices.

These three papers all feature research that makes substantial theoretical contributions to contemporary research in psychology while also being grounded in consumption phenomenon that are relevant to many consumer researchers. Taken together, these three papers substantively deepen our understanding of the psychological processes underlying automatic effects on behavior caused by peripheral environmental cues.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“The Curious Case of Behavioral Backlash: Nonconscious Reactance to Marketing Slogans”
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Marketing practitioners rely on an impressive arsenal of persuasion tools, including brands, salespeople, prices, and slogans, in their attempt to influence consumer spending. A solid foundation of research in psychology and marketing would suggest that these tools can “persuade” consumers under the radar of consciousness. This research would further suggest a process whereby marketing tools have a positive impact on consumers’ responses, with incidental exposure to, say, a brand or slogan triggering behaviors that are consistent with that brand or slogan. However, while this priming process may occur in most environments, it may not generalize to marketing environments. Marketing environments have idiosyncrasies that could dampen or even reverse the intended effects of marketers’ tools.

One idiosyncrasy of marketing stimuli is that, unlike other environmental stimuli, people believe marketing stimuli exist to persuade them. That being said, this belief exists to varying degrees as a function of the marketing stimuli themselves. For instance, while people may relate to brands as innocuous relationship partners, the persuasive intent of slogans is much clearer. To address this issue empirically, we conducted a pretest examining consumers’ perceptions about the persuasive intent of two common persuasion tools: marketing slogans and brands. For this pretest, 50 participants were shown a series of five slogans, brands, or sentences, and asked to rate on a 7-point scale the extent to which they perceived each stimulus as an attempt to persuade them. The purpose of asking about the persuasive intent of sentences was simply to establish a baseline. Results showed that participants perceived the persuasive intent of brands (M=3.20) to be only trivially higher than that of sentences (M=3.00), while the persuasive intent of slogans was perceived to be quite high (M=5.13), and significantly higher than that of brands (F (2, 44)=3.47, p<.05).
Thus, while brands were perceived to be innocuous (no different than common sentences in their persuasive intent), slogans were perceived more clearly as persuasive appeals.

The perception that marketing tools are persuasive appeals sets these stimuli apart from other environmental stimuli. However, it is unclear how consumers respond to persuasive tools on a nonconscious level. One might argue that because the impact of priming on behavior is nonconscious (or, at least, people are not sufficiently aware to verbalize it), any defense mechanism against persuasion tools should not work. On the other hand, perhaps people can react against a persuasion tool without awareness of its presence or potential influence. This response could develop in the same way that other processes become automatic. That is, if people repeatedly and consistently responded to a persuasion tool with conscious reactance, over time they should come to nonconsciously react against it. In the context of the current research, we would therefore predict nonconscious reactance against slogans because consumers consciously perceive that slogans are persuasion tools. We would not, however, predict nonconscious reactance against brands because consumers lack the perception that brands are persuasion tools. These predictions were tested in study 1.

Study 1 used a 3 X 3 design (N=435), with prime tool (brand, slogan, or sentence) and prime message (save, spend, or neutral) manipulated between-subjects. Participants’ first task was a bogus memorization task in which we presented sentences, brands, or slogans that were related to either saving money (e.g., “He wore cheap attire”, “Dollar Store”, “The Best Deals Are Always Here!”), spending money (e.g., “He wore high-end attire”, “Tiffany”, “Luxury, you deserve it”), or were neutral (e.g., “He wore blue pants”, “Barnes and Noble”, “Time is what you make of it”). In a supposedly unrelated second experiment on shopping tendencies, we asked participants to imagine that they went shopping with $500, and indicate how much of the $500 they would like to spend. Their response was our dependent variable.

We included the sentences as a control condition and predicted that participants who were exposed to sentences would show prime-consistent behavior. This is precisely what we found. Relative to neutral sentences (M=$145.93), sentences with a message to save decreased spending (M=$105.91) and sentences with a message to spend increased spending (M=$185.18). As predicted, the same pattern of results was obtained among participants primed with brands. Willingness to spend in the neutral brands condition (M=$150.70) fell in between the savings brands condition (M=$94.29) and the spending brands condition (M=$189.27). Importantly, however, this pattern of results failed to hold among participants primed with slogans, who actually showed the exact opposite pattern of spending. Relative to slogans with a neutral message (M=$142.93), slogans with messages to save increased spending (M=$184.58) and slogans with messages to spend decreased spending (M=$105.23), all p’s <.05. Thus, while priming with brands (and sentences) produced prime-consistent behavior, priming with slogans produced prime-inconsistent behavior—a behavioral backlash.

We propose that consumers need not be consciously aware of a marketing tool’s persuasive intent for this behavioral backlash to occur. However, because participants in study 1 were exposed to prime tools supraliminally, conscious responses could have influenced consumer spending. Extensive debriefing suggested this was unlikely; nevertheless, in study 2, we used a more conservative, subliminal priming procedure to minimize conscious mediation, demand effects or hypothesis guessing. In addition, we dropped the brand condition and controlled for the stimuli presented by using the exact same phrases in both the sentence and slogan conditions. Therefore, the only difference between the conditions was subliminal priming of the word “sentence” or “slogan”.

Study 2 used a 2 X 3 design, with prime tool (slogan or sentence) and prime message (save, spend, or neutral) manipulated between-subjects (N=229). Participants were instructed to memorize the same sentences used in study 1’s bogus memorization task. However, while the sentences were presented in the center of the screen, the word “sentence” or “slogan” was presented for 60 ms in alternating, randomly-determined quadrants. Participants indicated whether each “flash” appeared on the left or right. Results revealed that among participants subliminally primed with the word “sentence”, messages to save reduced spending (M=$115.94) and messages to spend increased spending (M=$211.68) relative to neutral messages (M=$156.82). Conversely, among participants subliminally primed with the word “slogan”, messages to save increased spending (M=$197.22) and messages to spend decreased spending (M=$106.68) relative to neutral messages (M=$151.06), all p’s <.05. Thus, while activating the concept “sentence” produced prime-consistent behavior, “slogan” produced prime-inconsistent behavior.

In summary, certain persuasion tools may backfire and generate effects opposite to those intended by marketers. Our results provide an initial demonstration of this phenomenon by showing that stimuli structured as slogans (study 1) or represented as slogans (study 2) can incite a nonconscious behavioral backlash. Our findings suggest that this behavioral backlash is rooted in consumers’ conscious beliefs about the persuasive intent of marketing tools. These results underscore the necessity of understanding marketing’s idiosyncrasies before we can fully understanding priming effects in marketing environments.

“Ironic Effects of Goal Activation on Choice”
Kelly Goldsmith, Northwestern University
Ravi Dhar, Yale University

Consider a consumer who is choosing between two indulgent desserts. Further imagine that prior to choosing a dessert she notices a health magazine on a nearby table. How would exposure to the health magazine affect her choice? While it is now well established that consumer choice is goal driven, relatively little is known about how the incidental activation of a goal that conflicts with the goal associated with a choice task (hereafter referred to as the “choice goal”) will affect the choices that people make. For example, would this person be more or less likely to choose a more indulgent and less healthy dessert in comparison to a person for whom the health goal was not activated?

This paper explores how choice between two options is impacted when these alternatives pose a violation to another goal that has been activated prior to the choice. We draw from research on goal systems theory and behavioral decision theory to propose that when an incidental goal (e.g., health) that conflicts with the choice goal (e.g., to enjoy an indulgent treat) becomes activated prior to the choice, all available choice options will present a violation of the incidental goal. Thus when making their choice, consumers will experience the need to justify their incidental goal violation. As a consequence, consumers will be more likely to choose the option in the set that offers maximum attainment of the choice goal (e.g., a more indulgent special treat) than when the conflicting goal is not activated. Options providing maximum goal attainment may be easier to justify, when they offer the consumer a special or unique experience. Thus we predict an ironic effect of goal activation on choice: Goal activation can increase choice of the option that conflicts most with that goal.
Our predictions are tested in a series of six studies. Study 1 demonstrates the proposed effect. Using non-conscious goal priming, we manipulate if a conflicting goal (e.g., savings) is incidentally activated prior to choice (e.g., a choice between two expensive, luxury rental cars). The results demonstrate that the activation of a conflicting goal can ironically increase choice of the option the presents a greater conflict to that goal (e.g., the more expensive, luxury rental car). Study 2 demonstrates an important boundary condition. By manipulating both incidental goal activation (health goal vs. control) and goal conflict (a choice between two high calorie options that conflict with a health goal or a choice between two low calorie options that do not conflict), we show that goal activation leads to ironic effects only when none of the options in the choice set allow for pursuit of the incidentally activated goal. Study 3 rules out an alternate account for the pattern of results, replicating the choice effect and demonstrating that the incidental goal prime increases the accessibility of that goal, as intended. Testing for the mechanism behind this effect, Study 4 replicates these ironic effects with real choices (e.g., a choice between two unhealthy donuts for consumption), and assesses how goal conflict affects consumers’ interests in special or unique options. The results demonstrate that goal conflict increases interest in special or unique options, and further that this increase in interest in special or unique options mediates the effect of goal conflict on choice. Study 5 further examines the underlying process and rules out a second alternate account for the pattern of results by showing that these results cannot be explained by goal conflict increasing interest in options that offer “maximum violations”. Finally, in Study 6, we test if external prompts to justify a choice result in similar effects, by manipulating both goal conflict and an additional need for justification. The results show that goal conflict and the additional need for justification have an analogous effect on choice.

As the need for justification can affect consumer decisions and shift preference towards options that are supported by the best reasons, this research has clear implications for marketers seeking to maximize their understanding of consumer decision processes at the point of choice. For example, in an additional study we manipulated if a savings goal was incidentally activated (vs. a control), then gave participants a choice between two expensive, luxury suitcases that were priced equally ($695), one of which was labeled “only two left.” The results of this study showed that participants experiencing goal conflict (savings goal prime) were significantly more likely to choose whichever option was labeled as “only two left.” Building on the current set of studies, these results suggest that goal conflict and the need for justification may increase interest in products supported by many different reasons (e.g., limited availability). We hope that the current research will prompt future inquiry into this area.

“Catching Goals in the Act of Decision Making”
Kurt Carlson, Georgetown University
Robin J. Tanner, University of Wisconsin, Madison
Margaret G. Meloy, Pennsylvania State University
J. Edward Russo, Cornell University

Although consumers may prefer to think that their decisions are guided by conscious thought, accumulating evidence suggests that many choices are influenced by subtle and unrecognized environmental cues. Perhaps nowhere is the relevance for understanding consumer behavior more profound than in the advances that have been made in the area of nonconscious goal pursuit (Chartrand and Bargh 1996). Though the very idea of a parallel nonconscious goal system opens the door to new directions for research, many of these directions are challenged by the complexities of studying goals of which consumers are not aware. This paper introduces and validates a method for measuring goal activation levels during the consumer choice process. Rather than using free-form responses, or all-or-none measures of goal activation, we use a goal log that requires participants to assess the activation of a set of goals on an 11-point scale. Assessment happens midway through the decision to align assessment with the period of maximal goal activation. The method is tested across three studies.

In study 1, two goal primes, Memorize or Form an Impression, and the priming task (sentence completion) were borrowed from Chartrand and Bargh (1996). After the priming task, participants (N=51) made a choice between two scholarship applicants. Midway through the choice process, participants were interrupted and reported how active nine different goals were at that moment. Goal activation levels were recorded on an 11-point scale (0—not at all active; 10=maximally active). Participants then resumed reading the remaining information about the candidates, and selected the one they preferred. After their choice they reported whether the focal goals had been active (yes/no) during the choice process. If participants were aware of their goal activation levels, the difference in goal activation (Form an Impression-Memorize) should have been greater when the Form an Impression goal was primed than when Memorize was primed. This comparison revealed a greater difference when the Form an Impression goal was primed (M=5.08) than when the Memorize goal was primed (M=2.71, p<.05). However, post-choice measures revealed such no difference—the same proportion of Ps indicated that the Memorize goal was active (68%) in both conditions, and slightly more indicated the Form an Impression goal was active in the Memorize condition (91%) than in the Form an Impression condition (88%). Whereas the mid-choice continuous assessment revealed prime consistent differences in goal activation, the post-choice measure produced the null result found repeatedly in prior research (e.g., Chartrand and Bargh 1996).

Other research has established that the consistency goal can be activated subliminally and that its activation influences consumer choice processes (Russo, Carlson, Meloy and Yog 2008). In study 2, we follow Russo et al. (2008) by activating the Consistency goal via parafoveal priming. We then measure goal activation levels for several goals, including the Consistency goal. We do so twice, once midway through and once just before the end of the choice. After the choice, participants (N=110) were debriefed for awareness (Chartrand and Bargh 1996). Similar to study 1, activation of the consistency goal measured midway through the choice was greater for participants who had been subliminally primed with consistency words (M=7.27) than it was for participants who were exposed to goal-neutral words (M=6.58; p<.05). The same was true for the measure of consistency taken after participants had seen all six of the attributes (Mconsistency=7.58; Mneutral=6.89; p<.05). Importantly, the activation levels of the other goals did not differ across condition for the early assessment (all p> .38) or the late assessment (all p> .24).

To deal with difficult tradeoffs, consumers often seek out choice alternatives that allow them to avoid making those painful tradeoffs (Luce 1998). When no such alternatives are available, the desire to avoid negative emotions “in-process” can become active (p. 21, Luce, Bettman, and Payne 2001). That is, difficult tradeoffs can activate the goal to avoid negative emotions. Following this logic, we reasoned that making tradeoffs salient would cause the Avoid Negative Feelings goal to increase in activation. We posited that having participants engage in attribute-based processing of non-alignable information for three appealing alternatives (hotels), would make the difficulty of the tradeoffs salient, which would lead to substantial activation of the Avoid Negative Emotions goal. In contrast presenting the alternatives serially (thereby requiring alter-
native-based processing), would not highlight tradeoffs across the alternatives, which would keep the Avoid Negative Emotions goal relatively inactive (i.e., at something like its chronic or background level of activation during a typical choice).

In Study 3, participants (N=50) decided between three hotels described by three attributes (Location, Pool, Services) in one of two information conditions, attribute-based or alternative-based processing. After reading all of the information, but before selecting their preferred hotel, participants reported the activation levels for 11 processing goals, including Avoid Negative Emotions.

As expected, participants in the attribute-based processing condition reported higher activation of the Avoid Negative Emotion goal (M=6.96 on the 0-to-10 scale) than participants in the alternative-based processing condition (M=2.92, p<.01). This result shows that the choice architecture, with no change in information content, can influence the activation of processing goals.

In conclusion, this research explores whether consumers can report goals that have been activated outside of their awareness. Perhaps the key takeaway is that even though consumers are typically unaware of what factor(s) in the environment caused a goal to become active, they can report if that goal is active when a sensitive assessment method is used. Our hope is that this method for catching goals in the act of decision making will help researchers identify goals that (a) underlie important consumer behaviors, (b) are activated by common contextual factors, and (c) are related to each other either through causal activation or through simple relatedness to a higher order goal.

REFERENCES