Aliterate Consumers in the Marketplace

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The past few decades have seen “increasing numbers of capable readers who are regularly choosing not to read” (Mikulecky, 1978, p. 3), leading to what has been called an aliteracy phenomenon. Unfortunately, aliterate consumers avoid much of the available information. Instead of reading the instructions for using products, they rely on trial and error (Wallendorf, 2001). This research explores consumer aliteracy relationships with similar consumer behavior constructs, including need for cognition and assertiveness, and explores the characteristics of the typical aliterate consumer. Finally, research questions for examining the effects of consumer aliteracy in the marketplace are offered.

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The past few decades have seen “increasing numbers of capable readers who are regularly choosing not to read” (Mikulecky, 1978, p. 3), leading to what has been called an aliteracy phenomenon. Consumers are overloaded with product information in the marketplace. Unfortunately, aliterate consumers avoid much of the available information. Instead of reading the instructions for using products, they rely on trial and error (Wallendorf, 2001).

In this research, the consumer aliteracy construct is developed, including a five-item measure of consumer aliteracy. This research also explores consumer aliteracy relationships with similar consumer behavior constructs. Finally, research questions for examining the effects of consumer aliteracy in the marketplace are offered, including the effects on advertising liking and comprehension.

The Consumer Aliteracy Construct

We define consumer aliteracy as the lack of reading habit in a capable reader participating in consumer behavior activities. We conducted a focus group of twelve consumers and we conducted eight in-depth consumer interviews to investigate the domain of the consumer aliteracy construct and to generate an initial pool of 67 scale items. Fifteen expert judges (i.e., marketing faculty and doctoral students at a Midwestern university) were consulted to critique the items. Items were removed that did not demonstrate face or content validity, resulting in a reduced set of 34 scale items. The 34 items were then presented in a survey to 301 consumers, where exploratory factor analysis revealed multiple factors with which the 34 items loaded. More consultations with expert judges resulted in reducing the scale to ten by eliminating items that were context specific or that were not related to consumer behaviors.

One hundred eleven consumers completed a survey that included the ten-item scale. Exploratory factor analysis revealed two factors (λ1=4.01 and λ2=2.39, however after further consideration, one factor was deemed situation-specific (e.g., reading nutritional information on packages, and taking products off shelves to read). After the situation-specific items were removed, the remaining five items accounted for 66.36% explained variance, had inter-item correlations ranging from .399-.676, and had Cronbach’s alpha of .870. Another survey of 33 consumers confirmed the convergence of the five-items (i.e., Cronbach’s alpha=.822). The final five-items to measure consumer aliteracy are: (1) I carefully read a document before I sign it, (2) I read the terms and conditions of a sale before I buy a product, (3) I am the kind of person who reads fine print in shopping, (4) When making a purchase, I read details word for word, and (5) I carefully read all transaction information before purchasing.

The Typical Aliterate Consumer

A survey of 111 respondents (i.e., where 54% were female and 62% were white/Caucasian) at a Southeastern university revealed some insights into the consumer aliteracy construct. Specifically, consumer aliteracy correlations with need for cognition and with consumer assertiveness were examined. Also, reading behaviors were examined to describe differences in aliteracy levels.

Aliterate consumers are not necessarily non-intellectuals, nor are consumer aliteracy synonymous with low need for cognition. In fact, consumer aliteracy did not significantly correlate with need for cognition (r=.135, p=.163). Respondents were also measured on consumer assertiveness, the tendency for an individual to request information or assistance (Richins 1983). Consumer aliteracy significantly correlated with assertiveness (i.e., r=.227, p=.017). Consumers who were highly aliterate were also highly assertive, perhaps because they would rather ask for information instead of reading the information for themselves.

2Need for cognition scale adapted from Wood and Swait (2002)
3Assertiveness scale adapted from Richins (1983)
Consumers who had subscriptions to newspapers (i.e., including local or national newspapers such as *USA Today*) or to economic/political/academic periodicals (e.g., *Fortune*) were lower in consumer aliteracy than those who did not have these types of subscriptions (i.e., mean$_{\text{news}}$=2.39, mean$_{\text{no news}}$=3.10, p=.027, and mean$_{\text{periodical}}$=2.53, mean$_{\text{no periodical}}$=3.18, p=.015). Consumers who admitted to not holding any print subscriptions were more aliterate than those who did have some kind of print subscription (i.e., mean$_{\text{no print}}$=3.49, mean$_{\text{print}}$=2.71, p=.003).

Interestingly, consumers who held subscriptions to either magazines (e.g., *Cosmopolitan* or *Sports Illustrated*) or to hobby periodicals (e.g., *Golf*) did not significantly differ on consumer aliteracy (i.e., p=.181 and p=.236, respectively). Also, consumer aliteracy did not significantly correlate with number of books read in the past 30 days (i.e., r=.158, p=.09). This may be evidence that reading strictly for pleasure is not related to consumer aliteracy in the marketplace.

**Consumer Aliteracy Research Questions**

Additional research is necessary to understand the effects of consumer aliteracy on consumer behaviors. The current research will continue with two additional studies, focusing on the following research questions.

1. **Does consumer aliteracy bring about lower ad comprehension/ad liking?** Research on levels of processing effect (e.g., Craik & Lockhart, 1972), holds that there are several factors that affect processing depth. Because they lack the motivation to read, aliterate consumers may not engage in deeper processing levels. In turn, failure to use their processing abilities may cause aliterate consumers to poorly comprehend written materials (Guthrie & Wigfield, 1999).

2. **Does ad complexity moderate the relationship between consumer aliteracy and ad comprehension/ad liking?** When message readability gets more complicated, individuals' ability to assess message arguments tends to be reduced because their working memory capacity is reduced (Chebat et al., 2003). Thus, although both literate and aliterate consumers will display a drop in comprehension and subsequent ad liking as text difficulty increases, the drop should be more pronounced among highly aliterate consumers.

3. **Do visual aids in advertisements moderate the relationship between consumer aliteracy and ad comprehension/ad liking?** In information processing, aliterate individuals have been shown to rely more on pictorial information than on detailed written information (Kylene, 1996, 110-113). Thus, pictures used as a form of visual aid in product advertisements will benefit aliterate consumers more than such aids will help literate consumers.

**Conclusion**

The aliteracy social phenomenon is growing but is difficult to detect and thus difficult to counter. An investigation of consumer aliteracy may enable managers to either try to influence the consumer aliteracy tendencies, or use non-word message strategies in order to better communicate with highly aliterate consumers.

**References**


Too Many Cooks Spoil the Broth: How Conflicting Nonconscious Goals Influence Consumer Choice

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Consumers are surrounded by a seemingly infinite number of brand images. Since Bargh (1990) proposed powerful effects of environmental cues on behavior, a burgeoning set of research in marketing has demonstrated that 1) environmental cues (e.g., brand images) can activate a consumer goal outside of awareness and 2) consumer choices are affected by this incidentally activated goal (e.g., Chartrand, Huber, Shiv, and Tanner, 2008).

These earlier works, however, leave two important questions unanswered regarding nonconscious goals. First, can various environmental cues encountered in everyday life (e.g., Nordstrom vs. Wal-Mart) activate multiple conflicting goals (e.g., prestige-related vs. thrift-related goals) outside of individuals’ awareness? Second, if multiple (conflicting) nonconscious goals can be activated, how can those conflicting nonconscious goals shape consumer behavior? Despite a body of research in which multiple (conscious) goal pursuit...