Brands and Desire: Implicit Brand Processing Biases Incidental Decision-Making

Philip Harris, University of Melbourne, Australia
Carsten Murawski, The University of Melbourne, Australia

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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/16370/volumes/v38/NA-38

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Philip Harris, The University of Melbourne, Australia
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This study examined whether implicit brand processing can impact on decision-making for incidental rewards. Findings indicated a bias towards impulsive choices of incidental rewards following subconscious brand logo exposure. Findings of the study were linked with the effect of a generalized affective-motivation mechanism cued by favored brand exposure.

Introduction

Recent research has indicated that subliminal brand presentation may influence goal-directed behavior, even without conscious awareness of the stimulus (Chartrand, Huber, Shiv, & Tanner, 2008; Fitzsimons, Chartrand, & Fitzsimons, 2008). In addition, recent neuroimaging insights support the proposal that favored brands act as reward cues that moderate decision-making (e.g. Plassmann, Kenning, Deppe, Kugel, & Schwindt, 2008; Schaefer & Rotte, 2007). Additionally, recent theory discussing motivated goal pursuit distinguishes two separate reward-related components of goal-related behavior: a status linked with specific goal-pursuit states, and also a non-specific status which motivates behavior towards or away from a reward cue (Kent. C, Berridge, Robinson, & Aldridge, 2009; Martin Veltkamp, Aarts, & Custers, 2009). Together, these insights may have important consequences for brand theory. Brand responses may impact on behaviour via reward-related processing in parallel with activation of brand-related schema in the absence of conscious processing. Furthermore, the impact of brand processing on decision-making may occur not only by moderating the salience of goal-linked attitudes, but also by activating non-specific valence-linked motivational states. In this research we sought to examine these processes. We examined whether: 1). implicit brand processing can impact on incidental decision-making, and 2). whether implicit processing primed by brands provides an impulsive bias on decision-making processes.

Conceptual Development

Insights from neurobiological research provide the basis for the intriguing possibility that implicit brand processing may impact on decision-making not only via implicit goal-linked processes, but also by influencing the contribution of the affective-motivational system towards decision-making. Following subliminal priming with favored brands, we anticipated that reward-based decision-making subversive by a non-specific motivational process would show greater influence of impulsivity than decisions that are less exposed to the influence of the affective-motivational system. Furthermore, as motivational states primed by reward cues may bias incidental decisions (Li, 2008; Van den Bergh, Dewitte, & Warlop, 2008; Wilson & Daly, 2004), an initial experimental hypothesis (H1) proposed that subconscious priming by brands linked with reward value would motivate impulsive choices for incidental rewards. In view of evidence linking impulsivity with faster task responses (Ramanathan & Menon, 2006), a second experimental hypothesis (H2) proposed that response times for choices of incidental rewards would be reduced when subconsciously primed by brands linked with reward value.

Method

One hundred and eighty-three undergraduate college students participated in a computer-based temporal discounting task which offered a series of choices between an immediate reward of $20 and a reward of higher value to be paid at one of six possible delays (1, 10, 21, 55, 90 180 days). Each choice was preceded by the subliminal presentation (16 ms, pre- and post-masked) of one of four priming image types: brand logos (Apple or Windows); smiling faces, or household objects which served as a baseline condition. Participants completed the discounting task four times, once for each of the priming image types. The principal dependent variable was the subjective value assigned to delayed rewards when subliminally primed by each of the four image types. Following the discounting task, participants completed a five-item brand affect scale which incorporated seven-point ratings of brand salience, brand affective value, brand ownership, desire to own brand products, and intention to purchase branded products within the next six months. A post-hoc recognition task assessed participants’ recognition of stimuli used in the main experimental task.

Results

Brand affect scale ratings for Apple were significantly higher than for Windows overall, t(183)=3.83, p=.0001. A logistic model was fitted to participants’ choices in order to investigate the relationship between decision parameters (reward amount, reward delay, and priming condition) and response time on the one hand, and choice on the other. Compared to decisions made following a neutral prime, ‘Now’ decisions were significantly more likely following brand primes (bApple=-.0703, p<.05; bWindows=-.0566, p<.10). These data provide support H1. In a second model, the probability of choice of a ‘Now’ reward decision was higher when response times were lower (bResponseTime=-.0648, p<.01) and when decisions were primed with the Apple or Windows logos. (bApple=-.0667, p<.05; bWindows=-.0666, p<.05). This data demonstrates that impulsive choices are significantly associated with faster responses and support H2. Panel regression models fitted to response times indicated that incidental reward choices following brand and smile primes were associated with faster response times than when following a neutral prime (bApple=-.0582, p<.01; bWindows=-.0636, p<.01), and that the reduction in response times following a brand prime was directionally strongest when choosing immediate rewards (bApple=-.1021, p<.01; bWindows=-.0613, p<.10). These data provide further support for H2. Finally, logistic models of choice revealed that that incorporation of response times in a choice model increased the predictive power of the model, and thus revealed participants’ preferences.

Discussion

Our results indicate that the affective value associated with a brand may impact on unrelated decision-making processes. Following presentation of brand logos, participants were more likely to choose an immediate reward, and to do so more quickly than when primed by a neutral stimulus. Further, participants did not explicitly recognize presentation of brand logos in the discounting task, indicating that the effects of brand presentation on decision-making occurred without conscious awareness of the priming episode. Questionnaire responses indicated significantly stronger brand affect ratings linked with Apple than with Windows brands. Linking these explicit questionnaire responses with decision data, we note that stimuli with affective value have been demonstrated to impact on the extent that delayed rewards are discounted (Van den Bergh, et al., 2008; Wilson & Daly, 2004). Further, neuroimaging research indicates that immediate reward choices reflect greater relative contributions of neural systems associated with affective...
processing (McClure, Ericson, Laibson, Loewenstein, & Cohen, 2007; McClure, Laibson, & Cohen, 2004). In view of these findings, we propose that in the current research, a favored brand may have primed generalized affective processes underlying decision-making mechanisms.

Response time data support this proposal. When primed by a favored brand, preference for immediate rewards was strongly associated with faster response-times for immediate reward choices but less so for delayed choices. Furthermore, a prediction model incorporating both choice and response times demonstrated that response time data improve the predictive power of a model that links brand priming with subsequent reward choices.

In parallel with research demonstrated that affective primes may provide an incidental impulsive bias on reward-linked decision-making, the current study provides initial evidence that brand logos may also provide a subconscious motivational bias on incidental decisions. We tentatively propose that a bias towards impulsive incidental reward choices reflects the effect of a generalized affective-motivation mechanism cued by favored brand exposure.