The Difference Novelty Makes: Incidental Exposure to Unfamiliar Stimuli Primes Exploratory Behavior

Gerri Spassova, Monash University, Australia
Alice Isen, Cornell University, USA

We investigate the role of contextual factors on consumer innovativeness. We propose that contextual exposure to novelty primes exploratory behavior that manifests in selecting less familiar and more diverse options in a subsequent choice task. Three studies demonstrate these effects and investigate the real-choice consequences by examining consumers’ post-sampling satisfaction.

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Gerri Spassova, Monash University, Australia  
Alice M. Isen, Cornell University, Ithaca, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Understanding what makes consumers more likely to explore new products is of crucial importance to marketers. Prior research on consumer innovativeness has focused on identifying stable individual characteristics that determine the propensity of consumers to try new offerings. The present research takes a different perspective by investigating the role of contextual factors on consumer innovativeness. We propose that situational exposure to novelty primes exploratory behavior that carries over to subsequent unrelated choice tasks. Three studies demonstrate these effects and investigate their consequences.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
At the individual consumer level, innovativeness has been operationalized primarily as a stable trait, a “predisposition to buy new and different brands rather than remain with previous choices” (Steenkamp, ter Hofsteede, and Wedel 1999) and has been measured using various personality scales (Mehrabian 1978; Raju 1980; Zuckerman 1978).

There is some evidence, however, that innovativeness may be a malleable construct. For example, innovativeness is influenced by socio-behavioral variables, such as age, education, and income (Steenkamp and Gielens 2003), and by prior knowledge (Moreau, Lehmann, and Markman 2001). The amount of change in a person’s life can also affect consumers’ likelihood of trying less familiar products (Wood 2009) and contextual factors, such as positive mood, can enhance consumers’ propensity to adopt brand extensions (Barone, Miniard, and Romeo 2000) or try less familiar products (Kahn and Isen 1993; Menon and Kahn 1999). In this research, we investigate the possibility that exposure to contextual novelty also promotes innovativeness, by priming exploratory behavior.

Context can have powerful effects on behavior (Bargh, Chen, and Burrows 1996; Bargh et al. 2001; Fitzsimons, Chartrand, and Fitzsimons 2008). Subtle environmental cues can activate mental constructs related to traits or goals that subsequently prompt construct-consistent behavior. Behavior can be automatically guided by the presentation of semantic associates (e.g., Bargh et al. 2001; Chartrand and Bargh 1996; Chartrand, Huber, Shiv and Tanner 2008), by the presence of other people (Bargh et al. 1996; Shah 2003), or by situations or objects associated with the behavior (e.g., Aarts and Dijksterhuis 2003; Chen, Lee-Chai, and Bargh 2001; Kay and Ross 2003). Even stimuli that have no prior associations but from which people extract meaning, such as visual arrays, can be a source of non-conscious construct activation (Maimaran and Wheeler 2008).

In this research we argue that behavior can also be influenced by stimuli that carry different semantic meanings but share a common property, such as being novel. We propose that this common property prompts property-consistent behavior, which carries over to unrelated situations. Specifically, we argue that exposure to novel stimuli primes subsequent exploratory behavior. It has been established that novel stimuli attract attention and promote exploration (Berlyne 1960; Fiske and Maddi 1961; Hirshman 1980; Venkatesan 1973). We build on this research and propose that exposure to novel stimuli prompts exploration in an unrelated subsequent situation, similar to the way in which exposure to a cue activating a semantic concept primes behavior consistent with this concept. We investigate the implications of the proposed effect for consumer behavior by testing the hypothesis that presentation of novel contextual stimuli prompts consumers to choose less familiar and more diverse products in a subsequent choice task.

METHOD AND FINDINGS
Study 1 shows that people who have been exposed to novelty choose a broader range of products in an unrelated subsequent choice task, but only when the available options are relatively unfamiliar. Novelty is operationalized as exposure to either new or familiarized neutral images. The subsequent consumer task involves choice of snacks from a set containing either very familiar options or less familiar options. A 2 x 2 ANOVA reveals a significant interaction between novelty prime and choice set familiarity (F(1, 97) = 6.43; p < .05). Novelty-primed participants choose a broader range of options than controls, indicating a greater propensity to explore, but only when the available options are relatively unfamiliar (Mnovelty = 4.97 vs. Mcontrol = 4.35, t(58) = 2.39, p = .01). When choosing from the more familiar set, novelty participants do not differ from controls (Mnovelty = 4.44 vs. Mcontrol = 4.92, t(41) = 1.32, p = .10).

Studies 2a and 2b test the effect of novelty on exploration in the context of choice of jam, using presentation of unfamiliar (vs. familiar) words as a manipulation of novelty. In Study 2a, where participants can choose as many options as they want from an assortment of 45 jams, novelty participants select a broader range of jams than controls (Mnovelty = 7.11 vs. Mcontrol = 4.61, F(1, 35) = 5.21, p < .05) and also choose a higher number of unusual flavors (Mnovelty = 4.08 vs. Mcontrol = 1.89, F(1, 35) = 8.51, p = .006). In study 2b, where participants can choose one out of a set of 30 jams, novelty-primed participants again choose more unusual and unfamiliar flavors (Mnovelty = .54 vs. Mcontrol = .15; F(1, 47) = 10.91, p = .002).

Study 3 replicates the previously observed effects in the context of real product choice. Novelty participants choose more unusual and unfamiliar jams, relative to controls (Mnovelty = .61 vs. Mcontrol = .31; F(1, 38) = 4.13, p = .05). After sampling their chosen jam, however, novelty participants report lower satisfaction with the chosen option (Mnovelty = 4.83 vs. Mcontrol = 5.86; F(1, 38) = 4.65, p < .05). Mediation analysis reveals that the effect of novelty exposure on post-sampling satisfaction is mediated by the unusualness of their choice.

CONTRIBUTION
This research contributes to the literature on consumer innovativeness by studying the ability of novelty exposure – a contextual factor that to some extent is controllable by retailers and manufacturers – to enhance exploratory behavior. We also contribute to the priming literature by showing that behavior can be influenced by exposure to stimuli that reference different semantic concepts but share a common property. This property primes related behavior that can carry over to unrelated tasks. Finally, we build on the literature on novelty by documenting downstream effects of novelty exposure that have not been shown before.
REFERENCES


