The Adaptiveness of Unconscious Brand-Attribute Associations

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We investigate properties of brand-attribute associations formed unconsciously. We show that changing the valence of attributes that have become unconsciously associated with a brand can impact brand evaluations. Our findings also suggest that people adaptively apply the evaluative implications of unconscious brand associations, updating their evaluations according to situational appropriateness.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Our product preferences and choices are often unconsciously influenced (e.g., Chartrand, 2005). One way seems to be through brand-attribute associations that have been formed unconsciously (Galli & Gorn, 2011), for example as a result of advertising showing brief, rapidly changing information to an audience uninterested in processing the information in depth. This research investigates properties of brand-attribute associations formed unconsciously. Specifically, it investigates if changes in the valence of an attribute have repercussions on the evaluation of a brand if the latter has been associated with the former unconsciously.

Prior research has shown that reevaluating an object influences evaluations of other objects that are consciously associated with it (e.g., Sweldens, van Osselaer, & Janiszewski, 2010). However, whether this effect would occur for unconscious associations has not been previously investigated. This is the main question we address. We also explore if the effects of reevaluating an attribute that is associated with a brand unconsciously are contingent on the context in which the attribute is reevaluated. Prior research has studied this for consciously associated attributes, and its findings suggest that the effect of reevaluating an attribute on evaluations of a consciously associated object depends indeed on the context in which the attribute reevaluation took place (Gawronski, Rydell, Vervliet, and De Houwer, 2010).

Increasing evidence now seems to support the view that the unconscious is flexible, adaptive, and sophisticated (e.g., see Bargh & Morsella, 2008, for a review), with one author recently arguing that any fundamental cognitive function that can be performed consciously can also be performed unconsciously (see Hassin, 2013). If so, the effects of unconscious associations should be similar to the effects of conscious associations observed in previous research. Based on this we expect that when an attribute gets revalued, its changed valence carries over to evaluations of an unconsciously associated brand, except when the attribute’s revaluation is specific to a given context and the brand evaluation context mismatches it (Gawronski et al., 2010).

Our first two experiments (1a, 1b) tested whether the revaluation of an attribute influences unconsciously associated brand evaluations, and our second two experiments (2a, 2b) explored the context-dependency of unconscious evaluations. Because of space constraints, we describe only experiment 1b in detail, and discuss very briefly the results of the other three.

Undergraduates (N = 107) were randomly assigned to conditions of a 2 (attribute: Hunan virus vs. fuel prices) × 2 (attribute association: X-ray/scan vs. neutral) experimental design, with the second variable manipulated within-subjects. Participants completed two ostensibly unrelated tasks. The first, supposedly about visual memory, constituted a subliminal conditioning procedure. In each trial, a string of “+++++” for 600 ms was followed by a Chinese word for 1500 milliseconds. Unbeknownst to participants, on target trials a neutral Chinese ideograph flashed very rapidly (26 ms) before the words “X-ray” and “scan,” and another neutral Chinese ideograph flashed very rapidly (26 ms) before unrelated neutral words such as “stone,” “drawer,” etc.

The second task was supposedly a marketing research project for a potential new express-mail company. Participants read a short news article about an issue faced by express-mail companies, followed by questions. In the Hunan virus condition, the article mentioned that the Hunan virus was being spread through postal mail, including express mail. Although invisible to the naked eye, the virus could easily be detected with adequate screening devices; therefore, postal and courier services shouldscan or X-ray each and every package. The article thus attached positive meaning to the words “X-ray” and “scan,” explicitly linking them to mail companies. The fuel prices article featured as a control discussed how oil prices had been rising rapidly over the previous six months; it did not change the valence of the words “X-ray” and “scan” (it did not mention them at all).

Participants then evaluated two brand names, “I Express-mail Company” and “G Express-mail Company” (in Chinese), using three semantic differential items (-3 to +3; negative/positive, unfavorable/favorable, and I dislike it/I like it). Finally, awareness of the ideographs during the conditioning procedure was assessed by having participants go through 20 trials of the conditioning task again and reporting, on each trial, whether they saw something on the screen in addition to the words and the “++++.”

The three attitudinal items were summed for each brand (α = .90), and the overall attitude toward “I” (paired with neutral words) was subtracted from the overall attitude toward “G” (paired with X-ray/scan). A one-way ANOVA on these difference scores indicated a significant effect of article (F(1, 102) = 6.30, p = .01). The (ideograph) brand paired with X-ray/scan was evaluated less favorably than the (ideograph) brand paired with neutral words in the fuel prices article condition (M_dif = 1.16), but this pattern was reversed in the Hunan virus article condition (M_dif = .38).

Experiments 1a and 1b both showed that changes in the valence of attributes associated with a brand influence brand evaluations even when the association is unconscious. Experiments 2a and 2b suggested that this effect is context-dependent: Both the context in which the attribute’s valence changes and the context in which the brand is evaluated seem to matter. When they matched, brand evaluations incorporated the attribute’s revised valence, but when they mismatched, brand evaluations reflected the attribute’s original valence (Experiment 2a). Interestingly, when it was not possible to tell whether the change in attribute valence applied to the brand, people unconsciously seemed to assume that it did (Experiment 2b).

By using a subliminal procedure combined with strict awareness checks, this research provides evidence for an associative learning system that can operate outside awareness, an important result theoretically speaking because the existence of such a system is still often disputed, following repeated failures to establish evaluative conditioning effects without conscious contingency awareness (Mitchell, De Houwer, and Lovibond, 2009). It suggests that what happens at the level of conscious processing might just be the proverbial “tip of the iceberg.” Considering the potentially worrisome implications of unconscious influences of advertising (Biegler & Vargas, 2013), future research in this area is certainly called for. [1000 words.]
REFERENCES