

DISSERTATION DEFENSE

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“Nonconscious Factors Influencing Attitude/Behavior/Judgment of Products and Sequences”

Researchers had previously tended to pay more attention to aspects of judgment and behavior that are deliberative and conscious. Only in the past decade or so has research emerged that gives due importance to factors that play a role in influencing attitude and behavior but may lie outside the realm of conscious awareness. In a review paper Fitzsimons et al (2002) posit that consumer choice behavior is a mix of conscious and nonconscious influences, and the role of nonconscious influences may be quite significant. They define nonconscious influences to include stimuli that are not consciously perceived by the consumer, downstream effects of consciously perceived stimuli, and decision processes that occur entirely outside of awareness.

In my dissertation I study the effects of stimuli that are consciously perceived but have a nonconscious influence on attitude, behavior or judgment in two domains- evaluation of products and evaluation of hedonic sequences.

In the first paper I examine whether aesthetically appealing packaging plays a role in the evaluation and experience of products. Do products truly benefit from aesthetically appealing packaging? Do all types of products benefit equally? I firstly provide empirical evidence demonstrating the influence of aesthetically appealing packaging on product valuation and product attitude. I find that aesthetically appealing packaging positively impacts product valuation and attitude for hedonic products but offers no such benefits for utilitarian products. I

further propose and test a conceptual model of packaging. Particularly, I propose a dual cognitive-affective route of how aesthetically appealing packaging may positively impact product attitude and valuation, which produces differential effects for utilitarian and hedonic products. I find that for familiar brands, affective reactions play a greater role than cognitive reactions in mediating the impact of packaging on product attitude and behavioral intent, suggesting that the influence of aesthetically appealing packaging may be at a more nonconscious automatic level. I present this work as a significant first step toward a fuller understanding of the conceptual role of packaging appeal in the entire product experience, for which there currently exists little to no research.

In the second paper, I study the two context effects that have arguably been the most reliably demonstrated in psychology and marketing: assimilation and contrast, in the realm of sequential hedonic judgment. Most judgments consumers make are parts of sequences and are hence unlikely to be context-free (Dato-on and Dahlstrom 2003; Stapel and Winkielman 1998). The literature in marketing is replete with examples of how the context in which a stimulus is embedded can have a significant impact on people's judgment of that stimulus, without their conscious awareness. *Assimilation* refers to a positive relationship between the value people place on the contextual stimuli surrounding a target and the value they place on that target itself. *Contrast* refers to a negative relationship between these two values (Martin, Seta, and Crelia 1990; Sherman et al. 1978). A general presupposition for much of the work on assimilation and contrast is that one or the other takes place, and that characteristics of the context such as domain match, product knowledge, availability of cognitive resources, and context set range dictate which one occurs. In this paper, I propose that both assimilation and contrast can co-occur within a sequence of experiences and present a hierarchical Bayesian model separating these effects within a unique, real world data set. I find that assimilation effects are prominent and contrast effects, which may be masked by assimilation, emerge only after the latter has been adjusted for. To the best of my knowledge, this work is the first empirical demonstration of hedonic contrast using real-world data where stimuli are presented in random or non-monotonic sequences, and the only work thus far to identify and separate assimilation and contrast effects within the same sequence of evaluations.