THE APPLICATION OF COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY TO THE AREA OF THE (IMPLICIT) PSYCHOLOGY OF THE CONSUMER: RESULTS AND PERSPECTIVES

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The research from cognitive psychology has found a promising path of application in the field of branding and consumer behaviour. In this paper, we review the most striking findings in implicit cognition that are relevant to the research on evaluations and decision making. In doing this, we expect to clarify the possible scope of cognitive psychology as a potential tool for research in consumer psychology. In particular, we discuss the possible implications of this line of research for the developing of two specific areas: subliminal advertising and implicit measures of brand perception.
Key words: Implicit cognition, Subliminal advertising, Cognitive psychology, Consumer psychology.

Las herramientas provenientes de la psicología cognitiva han encontrado una vía de aplicación prometedora en el ámbito del branding y el comportamiento del consumidor. El presente artículo tiene como objetivo establecer sus posibles alcances. Con este fin, se realiza una revisión de los hallazgos más relevantes en cognición implícita relacionados a los procesos de evaluación y toma de decisiones. Asimismo, se discuten las posibles implicaciones de estos estudios para la investigación en publicidad subliminal y medidas implícitas de percepción de marca.
Palabras clave: Cognición implícita, Publicidad subliminal, Psicología cognitiva, Psicología del consumidor.

In modern cognitive science, the possibility that most of our evaluations are based on automatic psychological processes seems to prevail in the academic arena. Indeed, the human mind acts like a tireless judge who is constantly "scanning" (through basic evaluations such as "I like-I don't like", "good-bad", etc.) everything it perceives: people, objects, information, sounds and smells. However, often the factors that influence these evaluations seep into our minds silently and they are inaccessible to consciousness.

In this context, theories of embodied cognition argue that complex cognitive processes draw on information from the body, establishing a correspondence between concrete physical experiences and more sophisticated social cognition (Meier, Schnall, Schwarz, & Bargh, 2012; Olivera La Rosa & Rosselló, 2013). For example, there is scientific evidence that the act of holding a pencil with one's mouth —a purely mechanical action involving the muscles associated with the smile— increases the level of amusement that a joke causes us (Strack, Martin, & Stepper, 1988). In the same vein, it has been shown that briefly holding a hot beverage increases the perceived "warmth" of a particular personality (as opposed to holding a cold beverage) (William & Bargh, 2008).

Interestingly, a number of studies suggest that these automatic processes are also operative in moral cognition. One such study found that the simple consumption of a bitter beverage increased the severity of the participants' moral judgments (Eskine, Kacinik, & Prinz, 2011). Moreover, when people think of immoral actions, they demonstrate greater willingness to use hygiene products; more clearly, that the sense of physical cleanliness reduces the negative emotional response that often accompanies the perpetuation of immoral behaviour (Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006); and odours of cleaning products promote charity (Linjenquist, Zhong, & Galinsky, 2010).

Recently, it has been found that the brief perception of unpleasant and shocking pictures (depicting gore and horror) increases our moral permissibility (Olivera La Rosa & Rosselló, 2012). The results suggest that the lower the level of awareness regarding the visualization of the image, the greater the emotional impact, which in turn increases the moral permissiveness (less severity). The implications of these results on daily life may be of utmost importance. For example, when flashes of

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images in which victims of a slaughter or a terrorist attack can be distinguished are presented in a news report, this could secure a tendency to judge the "morality" of the subsequent news more favourably.

THE SUBLIMINAL INFLUENCE IN PUBLICITY: BEYOND THE MYTH

There is also a possible application of these results in the area of persuasion: can the negatively impacting subliminal images favour our responsiveness to messages involving emotional content? The question is certainly valid. Indeed, over the last decade, the myth of subliminal advertising has been the subject of several studies which have shown in different ways that subliminally perceived information is able to influence short-term behaviour.

For example, a recent study found that anonymous faces that were digitally combined with the faces of celebrities (in a proportion of 65% anonymous face and 35% Tiger Woods or George Bush) were perceived as more reliable than faces that were not manipulated (Tanner & Maeng, 2012). What is really remarkable about these findings is that the participants were unable to explicitly recognize the manipulation, suggesting that the implicit recognition of the celebrity in question was sufficient to influence their evaluations of trust.

Indeed, the myth of advertising with subliminal content—meaning that its content is not consciously perceived— has been addressed by several studies, which have shown that subliminal information can generate behavioural effects in an experimental context. For example, Winkielman, Berridge and Wilbarger (2005) found that subliminal pictures of smiles influenced the behaviour of the participants, increasing their willingness to serve, consume, and even pay more money for a drink. Interestingly, the authors also found that the subliminal presentation of frowns had the opposite effect on participants. In this regard, it has been documented that subliminal exposure to verbs related with an action ("trust") improved the evaluation of a persuasive message, in turn increasing the predisposition to perform the action suggested in the message (Légal, Chappé, Coiffard, & Villard-Forest, 2012).

Moreover, there is evidence that subliminally perceiving words related to the category "thirst" increased the consumption of a random drink and the persuasive impact of an advertisement related to the category (Strahan, Spencer, & Zanna, 2002). Also, the subliminal perception of a (fictitious) brand name drink increased the preference for the brand in question and the intention to consume it (Karremans, Stroebe, & Claus, 2006). It is important to note that these studies concluded that although consumer choice can be influenced by subliminal stimuli, this influence is dependent upon the existence of a need that is yet to be satisfied. However, a recent study found that when words related to the category "thirst" were paired with emotionally positive words (in a process of subliminal conditioning), this association increased the motivation of consumers to consume a certain drink even in the absence of thirst (Veltkamp, Custer, & Aarts, 2011).

IMPLICIT BRANDING

The search for the subconscious processes and implicit measures of branding[1] is now a prolific field, and the significant findings go beyond the introductory purpose of this article. In this line, the current state of research suggests that the behavioural effects resulting from the subliminal perception of certain brands may be quite specific. In particular, it appears that those brands that have strong associations with "human" personality traits are able to generate automatic behavioural responses that are consistent with the *brand equity* of the brand. Thus, subliminal exposure to the logos of Apple and Disney led the study participants to behave more creatively and honestly (respectively) than participants who were exposed to the logos of IBM and E! (Fitzsimons, Chartrand, & Fitzsimons, 2008). Similarly, a study found that those people driving a car (virtually) with the Red Bull logo showed more aggression and reckless behaviour in their driving style, achieving excellent or terrible performances in races (Brasel & Gips, 2011).

Interestingly, there is evidence that although exposure to a brand name (Walmart) generated a behavioural response that was consistent to its identity (saving money), exposure to the brand's slogan ("Save money.

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[1] The concept of branding refers to the process of building and managing a brand. In particular, it describes everything related to development, consolidation of identity and generating brand value. (Wood, 2000)

Live better") generated the opposite response. According to the authors of the study, this contrasting effect is because the slogans were implicitly perceived as persuasion tactics, which meant that participants subconsciously "corrected" their responses (Laran, Dalton, & Andrade, 2010).

The human mind's susceptibility to contextual variables—a widely documented phenomenon in cognitive psychology— has also been demonstrated in applied studies in consumer psychology. There is evidence that exposure to contextual elements (perceptually and/or conceptually) related to a particular brand can affect the accessibility, evaluation and preference for the brand in question. In particular, Berger and Fitzsimons (2008) found that participants who were previously exposed to pictures of dogs evaluated a Puma brand product more favourably, an effect presumably attributed to the existing semantic association between the concepts of the dog and the cat, which is associated, in turn, with the concept of the puma.

These findings demonstrate that some brand associations exist even at a basic cognitive level and are strong enough to generate behavioural effects. Moreover, if we assume that we live immersed in an environment that is saturated with commercial stimuli and our mind is especially susceptible to subconscious influences, the need to incorporate implicit brand measures (that go beyond the subjective report and its cognitive limitations) seems to be a natural step in the field of branding. While the first steps have already been taken, they are still incipient if we think that for decades implicit tests have been used to study in depth the attitudes towards controversial issues (stereotypes, prejudices, etc.) or that demand responses that are difficult to reach on an introspective level (the consumer "thinks" that their response is true but their behaviour proves the opposite).

In this scenario, the Implicit Association Test (IAT, Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) has taken the lead as the most commonly used implicit attitudes measure. This test evaluates the automatic associations between a bipolar target (Nike vs. Reebok) and a bipolar attribute (fast vs. slow) through a series of categorization tests requiring prompt responses (Dimofte, 2010). The fundamental principle is that when two concepts which are strongly associated (e.g. Nike and fast) share the same response key, the reaction time is less than when this is not the case (e.g., Nike-slow vs. Reebok -fast). In this line, it was found that there is an automatic tendency to "adjust" our evaluations to the expectations we have of the standards of the brand. Thus, it is the case that an attribute of a brand categorized as objectively inferior (on a numerical scale) to another brand, implying high expectations, can be perceived implicitly as equivalent, or even superior. For example, a Hyundai engine with a capacity of 150 horsepower may be average objectively, but is automatically perceived as very positive for a Hyundai (Dimofte & Johansson, 2009).

The use of implicit measures, and specifically the IAT, has proven especially useful in the study of ambivalent attitudes. For example, documentaries such as Super Size Me or Fast Food Nation have revealed the widespread perception of McDonald's as an "unhealthy" brand. However, although this negative attitude toward the brand is easily documentable at the explicit level, implicit positive attitudes towards it may remain intact (a good bite of a Big-Mac, the smell of fries, etc.). The same principle applies to electoral processes, with the existence of candidates/parties associated with concepts that we reject explicitly.

The implicit measures have also helped to illuminate shadowy areas of consumer psychology, such as the influence of negative rumours related to a brand. For example, although the rumour that claimed that McDonald's burgers contained red worms was not credible explicitly, subsequent reports demonstrated that the rumour negatively influenced the intention to purchase the brand. The most effective solution was to expose consumers to new (positive) information associated with the rumour, specifically, reporting that red worms were a highly valued product in French cuisine. In this particular case, the use of the IAT facilitated proof that "contaminating" brand associations emerge very quickly and cannot be suppressed, but exposing consumers to new "positive" information associated with the "contaminating" information results in a substantial improvement of the implicit attitudes toward this information (Dimofte, 2010).

Given the relevance of the above findings, it is not surprising that, in recent years, the market research companies and customers have gained greater

awareness of the potential of cognitive science in the commercial arena. In this context, the emergence of what is known as neuromarketing (applying the techniques of neuroscience to the field of marketing) has shown the existence of a market that is particularly receptive to the possibility of knowing the perceptions of consumer at the implicit level. The tools exist.

CONCLUSIONS

The contributions of research in implicit cognition have opened a new avenue for the field of advertising and branding. Indeed, the growing interest aroused by this line of research has made it possible to establish the foundations of a new trend in consumer psychology.

In this context, both social cognition studies and studies specifically designed for the field of advertising offer consistent results: subliminal information has the ability to influence behaviour. Therefore, we can say that subliminal advertising is not a myth *per se* (although the famous case of Vicary and his "Drink Coca Cola" "Eat popcorn" did prove to be false). However, it is important to be cautious when talking about the practical possibilities of this resource. In the same way that studies with subliminally induced stimuli have highlighted the complexity of the process —in the sense that each variable involved in the induction process plays a decisive role in the final result—, it is to be expected that this pattern will also take place in the advertising arena.

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