

Editorial Note

Nonconscious Consumer Psychology

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What exactly is “nonconscious consumer psychology?” We use the term to describe a category of consumption behavior that is driven by processes that occur outside a consumer’s conscious awareness. In other words, individuals engage in consumption-related cognition, motivation, decision making, emotion, and behavior without recognizing the role that nonconscious processes played in shaping them.

A growing literature has documented that a wide range of consumption behaviors are strongly influenced by factors outside of people’s conscious awareness. For instance, consumers are often unaware they have been exposed to an environmental cue that triggers a given consumption behavior, or are unaware of a mental process that is occurring outside conscious awareness, or are even unaware of the consumption-related outcome of such a nonconscious process (Chartrand, 2005). Such processes are often adaptive and highly functional, but at times can lead to undesirable outcomes for consumers. By shining a light on a wide range of nonconscious consumer psychology we hope to facilitate increased reliance on our unconscious systems in certain situations and equip consumers to defend themselves when unconscious processes can lead to negative outcomes.

What exactly then is a nonconscious psychological process for a consumer? We define it as a subset of automatic processing (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). An automatic process is one that, once set into motion, has no need of conscious intervention (Bargh, 1989). The labeling of automatic processes in social and cognitive psychology, including those set forth in dual process models, implies that processes are either automatic or they are not. Labels such as automatic/controlled, implicit/explicit, conscious/nonconscious, spontaneous/deliberative, and System 1/System 2 by their dichotomous nature suggest that consumers are either in conscious decision making mode or have their unconscious driving their decision making entirely. However, there are

different elements of automaticity (including lack of awareness, lack of intent, efficiency, and lack of control; see Bargh, 1994). These elements do not always go together and most, if not all, automatic processes have only a subset of them. For instance, typing is efficient (but does not have the other elements), performance on the classic Stroop task has lack of control, and most priming effects have lack of awareness and intent.

Research on nonconscious processes in consumer behavior has tended to focus on lack of conscious awareness. But it is important to note that even when focusing on awareness, it is not the case that a given process is one a person is either totally aware of or totally unaware of. Most consumer behavior falls into a middle ground, where some component of the process is conscious (that is, consumers are aware of it) while some is not accessible to the consumer. In other words, research has shown that virtually all consumer psychological processes range on a continuum from highly conscious to entirely nonconscious, and don’t fall only into one of the two “buckets.” This continuum view of the conscious nature of decision making is important as it suggests that the study of nonconscious processes in consumer choice is important not just for a small category of research topics that focus on subliminal persuasion and other relatively rare and/or extreme situations. Rather, virtually all consumer psychology has both a conscious and nonconscious elements that are important to understand. As a result, we believe that consumer psychologists studying motivation, emotion, attitude formation, and decision making should all consider the role of the unconscious in the specific processes they are examining.

The primary reason we argue that all consumer psychologists should factor processes outside of awareness into their theorizing is that for a consumer to control a process, he or she must, almost by definition, be aware of it (Bargh, 1999; Wegener & Petty, 1997; Wilson & Brekke, 1994). Of course, it may often be the case that consumers may not want or need to control a process that occurs automatically and outside of awareness. Presumably, the reason a consumer responds to a particular stimulus without conscious acknowledgment is that

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this response has proven favorable over the course of their lives (and even over human history). Put differently, much of our unconscious consumer processing is likely to be quite adaptive and functional. In such situations, the consumer need not be concerned. These processes save precious conscious cognitive resources in a world of increasingly taxed individuals. But when the nonconscious system leads to an undesirable outcome, a consumer can only avoid this outcome if he or she is aware that the process is occurring in the first place. By more broadly studying such processes and perhaps developing response or control strategies, consumer welfare can be substantially enhanced.

A brief history of the nonconscious in consumer psychology

It was not that long ago that the use of the term nonconscious (or unconscious) to describe consumer psychology was essentially verboten. Perhaps researchers were (too) comfortable with the traditional information processing models implying that consumer behavior is driven by conscious, deliberative thought and choice. Perhaps some were unaware of the virtual revolution of automaticity in social psychology over the last several decades. Perhaps consumer psychologists, along with many consumers, did not *want* to acknowledge that many of the processes that occur in a consumption domain occur largely outside the awareness of the consumer. In 2001 a group of 12 researchers gathered in a research track at the Choice Symposium to talk about their belief that the unconscious played an important, or some might say critical, role in forwarding our understanding of consumer psychology (Fitzsimons et al., 2002). It was emboldening to (i) hear that other researchers were working on related research ideas centered around nonconscious processes and (ii) learn that none of us were alone in experiencing strong resistance from consumer research gatekeepers (e.g., editors and editorial boards) to the notion that key processes in consumption were often largely nonconscious.

In the 10 years since that conference there has been an explosion of research on consumption being driven by processes occurring outside conscious awareness. It is rare to see an issue of the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (or any other top tier consumer behavior outlet) that does not have multiple articles that in one way or another examine nonconscious consumer psychology. The field has transformed to a point where most scholars simply take the critical role of nonconscious processes in consumer psychology as a given.

Although nonconscious consumer psychology largely began with researchers applying established findings and methodological tools from the fields of social and cognitive psychology to the domain of consumption, it has become clear that consumption is not “just another domain” in which one can apply these ideas. Rather, the consumption setting has proven to play a fundamental role in the nonconscious space, as evidenced by more and more social and cognitive psychologists studying nonconscious processes in the consumer domain. In fact, some of the most important theoretical advances in the field of nonconscious processes more generally have been published in consumer journals such as *JCP*. Those in the basic disciplines, particularly social psychology, often follow up the work, the

results of which are published in psychology journals. In part, this is due to the incredibly broad nature of the consumption arena, which cuts across motivation, emotion, attitude formation, judgment and decision making, information processing, and behavior. But it is likely also the case that consumption has proven to be such a popular context in which to study nonconscious processes because so much of our consumption behavior is driven by such processes. Moreover, it is a domain in which the relevance for our daily lives is evident. Everyone consumes — many times a day — and it is easy to see the practical implications of these nonconscious processes in our daily consumption and how they affect us in powerful ways.

Motivation for and overview of the special issue

When the editor asked us to co-edit this special issue on nonconscious processes in consumer psychology, we thought it would provide a great opportunity to showcase how far the field has come in such a short time. Our goal with this special issue was to capture a snapshot of where current thinking is on nonconscious processes in consumer domains, and the contributors to this special issue have done a superb job at providing an accurate overview of some of the key issues being investigated in the field. They also nicely illustrate how nonconscious processes are so very boundary-crossing in current research practices.

Two of the articles explore the topic of “unconscious thought,” a thought process that occurs without conscious attention, which has previously been shown to lead to benefits versus more traditional (conscious) thinking approaches to solving a problem (e.g., Dijksterhuis & Nordgren, 2006). In this issue, Bos, Dijksterhuis, and van Baaren explore the mechanism underlying the unconscious thought effect and find support for an unconscious attribute weighting process. Messner and Wanke explore the role of unconscious thought in situations with high and low levels of assortment availability. They find that classic information overload effects (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000) actually reverse under conditions of unconscious thought, and that high assortments yield the most satisfied consumers.

Many of the contributions focus one way or another on the effects of exposure to environmental stimuli on consumers. Two articles deal explicitly with the complex way that exposure to one stimulus can influence consumers through the activation of related constructs. Wheeler and Sleeth-Kepler show that incidental exposure to consumer products can activate a given construct, and that consumers will behave in accordance with that construct unless a second activated construct is inconsistent with the primary activation. Dimofte and Yalch find that indirect associations shared by dissimilar constructs can be simultaneously activated and influence one another despite no direct link between them. A third article on exposure effects by Fishbach, Ratner and Zhang examines how nonconscious activation of a positive framing of repetitive behaviors (e.g., loyalty) led to very different effects on subsequent behavior than a negative framing of the same behavior (e.g., boredom). In an article that focuses more on the motivational side of nonconscious exposure, Veltkamp, Custers, and Aarts show that nonconscious pairing

of a stimulus with positive affect can indeed lead to behavioral change, even in conditions of no motivation prior to exposure.

Two of the articles deal with the special case of incidental exposure to products in naturalistic settings, or product placements. Brasel and Gips look at performance effects of nonconscious exposure to an arousing brand name in the context of a racing video game and find both facilitation and interference, depending on game context. Hang and Auty explore the role of product placements on perceptual and conceptual fluency and identified a key moderator: whether children had an opportunity to directly interact with the brand in the gaming context.

In a shift from nonconscious processes triggered by exposure from an external source to internally oriented aspects of the consumer's self-evaluation, two of the articles examine the role of nonconscious processes in the interaction between the self and the environment. Roedder-John and Park explore how discrepancies between explicit and implicit self-esteem can lead to changes in materialism, and find that when implicit and explicit self-esteem diverge consumers are likely to become more materialistic. Forehand, Perkins and Reed examine when consumers are likely to contrast versus assimilate to age-based information in an advertisement and find that deliberative processing of the ad information leads to very different contrast/assimilation patterns than does impulsive processing of the ad. Their results suggest an important interaction between consumer processing style and assimilation style effects.

Finally, Kramer and Block contribute an article examining the nonconscious nature of consumer "peculiar beliefs." They connect literatures on contagion effects to those on superstition and present a series of interesting propositions on how peculiar beliefs will operate in consumption domains more generally.

Concluding comments

The first wave of research studying nonconscious processes in consumer domains largely demonstrated that a process could occur outside conscious awareness. The next wave of research has evolved to study how different nonconscious processes

interact with each other and with conscious processes. The 11 articles featured in this special issue are great illustrations of this second wave of research in nonconscious consumer psychology. Consumer psychologists no longer simply demonstrate, for example, that priming a consumer can change their behavior. Instead, we seek to understand how that prime operates, or use the basic notion of nonconscious exposure to better understand substantive phenomenon in the lives of consumers. It is our hope that this special issue will spur more research on the important role that the unconscious plays in the lives of consumers and in doing so improve both researcher understanding as well as consumer welfare.

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