

Brands on the brain: Do consumers use declarative information or experienced emotions to evaluate brands?

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Abstract

An fMRI study was conducted with unfamiliar and familiar (strong and weak) brands to assess linguistic encoding and retrieval processes, and the use of declarative and experiential information, in brand evaluations. As expected, activations in brain areas associated with linguistic encoding were higher for unfamiliar brands, but activations in brain areas associated with information retrieval were higher for strong brands. Interestingly, weak brands were engaged simultaneously in both processes. Most importantly, activations of the pallidum, associated with positive emotions, for strong brands and activations of the insula, associated with negative emotions, for weak and unfamiliar brands suggested that consumers use experienced emotions rather than declarative information to evaluate brands. As a result, brand experiences should be considered a key driver of brand equity in addition to brand awareness and cognitive associations.

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Introduction

How do consumers process and evaluate brands? Following most theories of human judgment and prominent brand equity models, consumers encode and retrieve declarative brand attributes and brand knowledge when they process and evaluate brands (Keller, 1993; Keller & Lehmann, 2006; Schwarz, 2004a). However, according to recent experiential models, brands may also evoke sensations and emotions as well as bodily and visceral responses during encoding and retrieval (Schwarz, 2004b; Damasio, 1990; Izard, 2009). Consequently, consumers may also use these brand experiences to render brand evaluations (Bechara & Damasio, 2005).

In this study, we will use functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), a brain-imaging technique that measures blood flow changes based on neural activity in different regions of the brain, to study encoding and retrieval processes and the use of declarative and experiential information in brand evaluations. Brain imaging techniques provide a powerful new methodology for consumer psychology. They can validate verbally based research but also refine and advance existing theory (Shiv et al., 2005). For example, a brain-imaging study by Yoon, Gutchess, Feinberg, and Polk (2006) on brand related and person related judgments called into question prior findings that similar processes occur when individuals process brands and people.

Judgment context and brand stimuli

The degree to which an ad hoc or retrieval process is invoked and declarative or experiential information is used depends on the judgment context—for example, the task to be performed and the

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nature of the stimuli. The judgment context selected for this study is a typical situation that consumers frequently encounter when they shop and purchase products as part of their everyday lives. The situation is characterized by short exposure, limited information presentation and time constraints to render an evaluation.

Specifically, participants will be shown several brands; they will be asked to briefly think about the brands and then evaluate them. The stimuli will be unfamiliar and familiar brands, and, within familiar brands, so-called “strong” and “weak” brands (Hoeffler & Keller, 2003; Keller, 1993). Both strong and weak brands can easily be recognized; however, strong brands display higher unaided recall and top-of-the-mind recall. Moreover, strong brands possess stronger and more positive brand associations (Hoeffler & Keller, 2003).

In the following, to derive hypotheses for our study, we discuss, first, ad hoc and retrieval-based processing and, second, the relative use of declarative and experiential information for unfamiliar, strong and weak brands in the context of this typical and frequently encountered judgment context.

Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Ad hoc and retrieval-based attitudes

When consumers are asked to evaluate a brand, they may construct an attitude *ad hoc* based on the information presented (“bottom up”) or they may retrieve information stored in long-term memory (“top down”) (for an overview, see van der Pligt, de Vries, Manstead, & van Harreveld, 2000). For unfamiliar brands, consumers have no information stored in long-term memory and thus need to construct an attitude *ad hoc* based on the information available. In the judgment context of our study, the most relevant source of information for doing so will be the brand name. Because the name is unfamiliar, consumers will be engaged in various linguistic encoding processes, including basic motor strategies, short-term memory maintenance and some cognitive elaboration (Baddeley, Eldridge, & Lewis, 1981). In contrast, when consumers render a judgment about a strong brand, they can simply retrieve information from long-term memory—for example, information available from prior indirect brand exposures (e.g., via brand communications) and from interacting with the brand (e.g., store visits and perhaps actual consumption) (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987; Johnson & Russo, 1984). In contrast to unfamiliar and strong brands, the processing of weak brands has not been addressed in prior research. Weak brands, interestingly, seem to share common aspects with both unfamiliar and strong brands. Specifically, because weak brands have lower levels of awareness than strong brands (i.e., they can be recognized easily but not recalled freely), consumers may be motivated to further analyze weak names in working memory, similar to unfamiliar brands. However, consumers can retrieve prior information from long-term memory to render a judgment for weak brands, as they can for strong brands. Thus, we expect to see more activation in brain regions associated with ad hoc linguistic processing of the brand name for unfamiliar and weak compared to strong brands. Conversely, we expect more activation in brain regions

associated with retrieval for strong and weak brands, compared to unfamiliar brands.

In which specific brain regions do we expect to find these differential activations? While information processing is widely distributed across the brain, there seem to be two “epicenters” or “convergence zones” that are of particular interest for the linguistic encoding and retrieval processes under consideration: Broca’s and Wernicke’s areas (Damasio, 1989; Mesulam, 1990). Broca’s area is engaged during various aspects of basic linguistic encoding, including motor, phonemic analysis and articulation (Davis et al., 2008; Watkins & Paus, 2004). Importantly, one part of Broca’s area, the inferior frontal gyrus (part triangularis), is activated when individuals process fictitious words such as brand names (Dietz, Jones, Gareau, Zeffiro, & Eden, 2005; Jessen et al., 1999; Xiao et al., 2005). If consumers are focused on analyzing the brand name, we should find increased activations in Broca’s area. In contrast, Wernicke’s area is responsible for comprehension and the construction of meaning (Lesser et al., 1986). Comprehension requires retrieval processes that map incoming information to existing knowledge.

Recent research has shown, however, that the localized view focused on Broca’s and Wernicke’s area seems to be incomplete (Foki, Gartus, Geissler, & Beisteiner, 2008; Lieberman, 2002). Other brain regions associated with linguistic encoding and retrieval processes must therefore be considered as well. That is, we must investigate empirically whether the activation pattern as a whole confirms our hypotheses. Thus, we expect the following differential brain activations to support the proposed processes underlying ad hoc and retrieval-based judgments:

H1. There will be greater activation of Broca’s area and other areas associated with linguistic processing of single-word units (such as brands) when consumers process unfamiliar brands and weak brands than strong brands.

H2. There will be greater activation of Wernicke’s area and other areas of retrieval when consumers process familiar (strong and weak brands) than unfamiliar brands.

Declarative and experiential information

According to Schwarz (2004a,b), when encoding and retrieving information, consumers may use two distinct types of information—“declarative” and “experiential” information—to render an evaluative judgment. When consumers use declarative knowledge, they access attributes, facts and knowledge about the target stimulus. When they use experiential information, they attend to their personal feelings and experiences (Schwarz, 2004a; Schwarz & Clore, 1996).

Declarative information is often accessed and used in a systematic, step-by-step fashion. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) classic expectancy-value model of attitudes, for example, assumes systematic processing by postulating that attitudes are based on accessible beliefs about the attitude object. Alternatively, declarative information may also be used heuristically e.g., by using simple rules of thumb (“the brand has good quality; therefore I like it”). Because strong brands possess more and stronger associations than weak brands and because these

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