

Research Report

Looks good to me: How eye movements influence product evaluation

Hao Shen ^{a,*}, Akshay Rao ^b

^a Department of Marketing, CUHK Business School, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, Hong Kong

^b Department of Marketing, Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA

Accepted by Cornelia Pechmann, Editor

Received 29 August 2014; received in revised form 10 November 2015; accepted 15 November 2015

Available online 19 November 2015

Abstract

When processing visually presented information, people move their eyes. This eye movement is governed by the employment of a general motor procedure related to direction. In three studies, we show that when subjects re-employ this directional motor procedure (that had been employed in a prior or contemporaneous (unrelated) task) when evaluating a product, a perception of fluency ensues, and this perception of fluency is then misattributed to the product under evaluation and enhances evaluations. We demonstrate the effect for intra-modal (repetition of eye movement) as well as cross-modal (contemporaneous eye and finger movements) settings.

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Keywords: Eye movement; Fluency; Evaluation

The process of examining stimuli often involves directionally specific eye movements. In a retail environment, consumers may look at products on a shelf in a particular order. Online or when watching television commercials, consumers often look in a particular direction when processing text, animation, or dynamic product images. Similarly, stationary objects that implicitly convey direction (e.g., automobiles or shoes) might also invoke eye movement. We suggest that the experience of eye movement is governed by the employment of a general motor procedure related to direction. If consumers move their eyes from top to bottom when examining a product, they effectively employ a motor procedure of “moving downward.” Drawing upon “fluency” research (Schwarz, 2004; Winkielman et al., 2003), we predict and observe that, if the direction of eye movement employed during product evaluation is perceived to be “easy” because it was recently employed, albeit in a different context, then product evaluations will be enhanced.

Further, fluency of eye movement can be experienced by either (a) prior, directionally similar movement in the same modality (i.e., eye movement followed by eye movement), or (b) contemporaneous, directionally similar movement in a different modality (e.g., finger and eye movement). That is, if consumers had moved their eyes in a particular direction recently, they would experience greater fluency if they were to employ the same eye movement later. Similarly, when consumers happen to make directionally specific motor movements that involve other body parts, they will find it easier to make directionally consistent movements with their eyes. If this eye movement occurs while processing information about a product, evaluation will be enhanced.

Three experiments examined these possibilities. Overall, our studies show that (a) repetition of an eye movement can enhance felt fluency, (b) a hand or arm movement (gross motor movement) that is accompanied by eye movement can also enhance felt fluency, and (c) this felt fluency can enhance product evaluations. These findings contribute to the literature on fluency by providing evidence that motor fluency might yield effects that are similar to those observed for perceptual and conceptual fluency. In addition, our results indicate that fluency effects might occur even when different motor modalities are implicated.

☆ The research for this project was supported by research grant GRF14502114 from the Research Grants Council, Hong Kong.

* Corresponding author at: Department of Marketing, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, Hong Kong.

E-mail addresses: shenhao@baf.cuhk.edu.hk (H. Shen), arao@umn.edu (A. Rao).

Table 1
Object ratings as a function of number orientation and orientation of object appearance (Experiment 1). *

The orientation of number appearance			
	Top to bottom	Bottom to top	M_{diff}
Product evaluation			
Picture moved from top	.79 (31, 1.01)	-.10 (36, 1.29)	.89 ***
Picture moved from bottom	.05 (31, 1.46)	.53 (30, 1.33)	-.48
M_{diff}	.74 **	-.63 **	
Experienced fluency			
Picture moved from top	.91 (31, .81)	.39 (36, 1.13)	.52 **
Picture moved from bottom	.38 (31, 1.01)	1.02 (30, 1.11)	-.64 **
M_{diff}	.53 **	-.63 **	

Note: The number of participants per cell and standard deviations are shown in parentheses.

* $p < .10$.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .01$.

Conceptual background

There is a small but emerging literature in marketing and consumer behavior that speaks to the issue of product location on consumer perceptions. For instance, Valanzuela and Raghuram (2009) observe that consumers believe that products placed in the middle of an array are the most popular. Relatedly, Deng and Kahn (2009) demonstrate that the physical location of a product image on a façade conveys information about its weight, such that images at the bottom or at the right side are deemed heavier. Similarly, Cai, Shen, and Hui (2012) show that consumers estimate higher prices for the products encountered on the right, rather than the left end of a continuum. Valanzuela, Raghuram, and Mitakakis (2013) find that consumers believe that products placed on the top shelf tend to be more expensive. These studies suggest that location can influence the perception of different types of product attributes which, in turn, can influence product evaluation.

Our research falls into the broad family of papers on location, though we invoke a different theoretical lens to study the phenomenon we observe and the process that accounts for it. Specifically, as we examine next, we suggest that the location in which a product is presented or toward which a product is moving could affect the direction of consumers' eye movement while examining this product. If consumers find it easy to move their eyes during product evaluation either because of prior eye movement or movement of other parts of the body, they would misattribute the ease they experience to the product. Consequently, product evaluation will be enhanced as well. Next, we discuss our conceptualization in greater detail.

Perceptual fluency due to eye movement

People evaluate stimuli favorably when the information associated with the object under evaluation is easy to process (Schwarz, 2004). For instance, it is easier to process a stimulus if previously viewed stimuli had similar perceptual or conceptual features (Lee & Labroo, 2004).

We argue that, in addition to features of the stimuli, a novel factor that may also influence fluency is the movement that people employ to process the stimulus. In particular, we examine the role of similar repeated eye movements in generating fluency. That is, when people employ directionally specific eye movements to process visual stimuli (e.g. viewing a product presented in a particular location; tracking animation or dynamic product images), the ease of making eye movements may contribute to felt fluency. Specifically, the employment of a particular (eye movement related) motor procedure during evaluation may yield the perception of fluency if that particular motor procedure had been recently employed, albeit on a different task. For instance, if a person had recently observed objects descending in her visual field, the subsequent reading of text from top to bottom would fit with this person's recently experienced eye movement and would produce a sense of "feeling right" about the experience of processing the textual information, and might then be misattributed to the material being read (cf., Cesario et al., 2004; Kim et al., 2009).

The transfer of motor fluency across modalities

Reusing an eye movement is premised on the similarity in muscular movement generating a sense of fluency (Krakauer & Shadmehr, 2006). However, the experience of movement could exist at a more abstract level as well.

There is evidence to support this contention. People's eyes often respond proactively to stimuli (Land, 2006; Land & Furneaux, 1997). Some ingenious research suggests that eye movement and the movement of other body parts (cross-modal consistency) may be part of an integrated system that does not require the eyes to collect visual information (which is their principal biological function). Foerster et al. (2012) found that when people make hand movements, their eyes orient toward a location ahead of the hands *even in the dark*. Similarly, people are better able to ignore distracting voices if they look away from the speaker that produces the auditory distraction (Reisberg, 1978). This cross-modal attention literature suggests that people may use their eyes as self-instruction about where their other modalities should attend (Reisberg, 1978). Seemingly, eyes move not simply to capture

Table 2
Object ratings as a function of ball orientation and orientation of object display (Experiment 2). *

The orientation of ball appearance			
	Left to right	Right to left	M_{diff}
Product evaluation			
Pen oriented toward the right	.56 (34, 1.32)	-.20 (32, 1.05)	.76 **
Pen oriented toward the left	-.13 (34, 1.20)	.35 (31, 1.25)	-.48
M_{diff}	.69 **	-.55*	
Shoe oriented toward the right	-.17 (35, 1.32)	-.63 (35, 1.51)	.46
Shoe oriented toward the left	-.50 (33, 1.17)	.22 (36, 1.15)	-.72 **
M_{diff}	.33	-.85 ***	

Note: The number of participants per cell and standard deviations are shown in parentheses.

* $p < .10$.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .01$.

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