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Application of conceptual profiling in brand, packaging and product development

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ABSTRACT

All objects, including brands and products, have perceptual (sensory) characteristics and conceptual associations. Together they determine how an object seems to us and how it impacts on our feelings. Capturing and quantifying the conceptual associations that trigger the feelings that induce reward and subsequently motivate behaviour (conceptual profiling), provides a rich source of insight for guiding brand and product development.

This paper presents a brief theoretical description of conceptualisation, followed by three practical case studies.

Study 1 demonstrates the application of segmentation to explore singularity of brand message in car brands. Across a sample of UK car buyers, Citroen exhibited a weak conceptual profile. However segmentation analysis revealed four underlying segments that conceptualise Citroen differently from each other, indicating that the brand does have clarity of meaning but it differs substantially across car buyers.

Study 2 compares brand versus unbranded product conceptual profiles for two dark chocolates. Scatterplots revealed a high correlation ($r = 0.78$, brand–product consonance) for one brand but dissonance ($r = 0.05$) for the other. The former succeeded in-market whereas the latter failed. The correlation coefficient may be used as an index of fit-to-brand. Because it is obtained independently from liking, this measure avoids the halo effect that often confounds direct measures of fit-to-brand.

Study 3 compares the conceptual profiles of five Scottish tartans to the conceptual profile of an unbranded Scotch whisky, with a view to selecting and featuring one of the tartans in branding. The tartans differed in colour, colour contrast and degree of formality of design. Conceptual profiling revealed that the formal tartans were highly consonant with the whisky irrespective of colour and contrast, presumably because of their strong mutual association with Scotland, but attempts to contemporise the tartan by adding informal design elements created dissonance.

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Introduction

Motivation and reward

It is widely acknowledged that most new products and brands fail to provide the anticipated return on investment and are withdrawn. This is despite the fact that the brand, product and pack will often have been developed and optimised using formal processes and the final launch decision will usually have been informed by research amongst target consumers.

A new product fails when the number of consumers buying it is too few or their frequency and volume of consumption is too modest to deliver profitable sales volumes. The cause of failure is therefore lack of motivation to buy the product. Motivation is the force that drives us to attain our goals (Higgins, 2009; Reiss, 2002); it may be conscious or non-conscious (Ellis, 1995; Ellis & Newton, 2010; Maslow, 1987). Obtaining reward is the fundamental goal that drives human behaviour (Berridge & Kringelbach, 2008; Gendolla & Brinkmann, 2009; Olds, 1956). Consequently we are motivated to buy products and brands that ultimately deliver reward most effectively.

A difficulty facing researchers is that certain aspects of reward may occur below the level of conscious awareness. This possibility has led some practitioners to suggest that qualitative and quantitative research involving direct questioning of consumers is inappropriate (Graves, 2010; Lindstrom, 2008). Whilst this may be an extreme view, it is widely recognised that formal measurement

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of liking or purchase intent may fail to predict consumption behaviour. A possible cause is that these constructs are inadequate surrogates for reward.

Various alternatives to direct questioning of consumers have been proposed, including the coding and analysis of facial expressions (Hill, 2008) and the application of neuroscience tools to measure brain activity (Lindstrom, 2008). These methods have not been developed to the point where they can be considered practical, proven research tools. An alternative approach is to understand what motivates consumers' choice behaviours. To this end, we have considered the role of concepts (Carey, 2009), sometimes referred to as implicit associations (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Greenwald, Klinger, & Schuh, 1995) or conceptual associations (Thomson, 2010), and how these might be elicited (Crocker & Thomson, 2014; Thomson & Crocker, 2014; Thomson, Crocker, & Marketo, 2010).

Concepts, conceptualisation and conceptual structure

In modern psychology, the conscious aspect of object representation is typically discussed under the heading of perception. Historically, philosophers such as Duncker (1941) and Claws (1965) described three aspects of object representation: percept (what something is), concept (what it means to us) and affective reaction (how much pleasure or reward it brings). This deconstruction is helpful because it alerts us to the critical role of concepts, conceptualisation and affect in the process of creating mental representations and the effect that they may have upon us (Carey, 2009).

The distinction between percept and concept is readily illustrated by considering any red object. Ignoring the form of the object, the main perceptual characteristic of the surface of the object is, by definition, redness. Closer scrutiny of the object might also reveal hints of yellowness, blueness, lightness–darkness, graininess–smoothness and glossiness–mattness. If so, these would be the perceptual or sensory characteristics of the image. Redness also has associated meaning (danger, anger, love, passion, luck, money, socialism, etc.). The nature and strength of a particular association depends on the nature of the object, the cultural background of the individual, and context.

In putting forward the proposition that all objects have conceptual content, we are tacitly suggesting that the conceptual content of man-made creations could (and should) be a matter of design or, at the very least, that the conceptual structure of the creation should not be ignored. Whilst this is normally the case with the branding of consumer packaged goods, until recently it has rarely been the case with products and packaging. This is surprising because consistency across these three primary touch-points (which we call 'conceptual consonance') should augment brand impact. Contradiction ('conceptual dissonance') should have the opposite effect. In order to create more holistic products, we require research tools for elucidating and quantifying key aspects of the conceptual structure of branding, packaging and products.

We envisage a psychological process (Fig. 1) where physical stimulation triggers perception, conceptualisation and a conscious affective experience (liking), although not necessarily in that order. Conceptualisation triggers emotional outcomes that may be positively or negatively rewarding. Various aspects of reward may occur above and below the level of conscious awareness. It is the totality of net reward engendered via these different routes that ultimately drives behaviour.

Emotion profiling versus conceptual profiling – some theoretical considerations

In principle it should be possible to predict choice behaviour by measuring and then comparing the nature and extent of reward delivered by the options available to consumers in a particular choice context. However, there are two key impediments: (i) aspects of reward that occur below the level of conscious awareness cannot be captured using research processes that rely solely on cognitive thought processing; (ii) aspects of reward may occur sometime after the point where liking or other affective measures are typically captured in research. This suggests net reward may be fundamentally un-measurable. However it is possible to learn something of consumers' likely reactions to products by elucidating and measuring the conceptualisations and emotional outcomes that engender reward (Fig. 1). To this end, product research tools have been developed for capturing and quantifying emotions (Cardello et al., 2012; King & Meiselman, 2009; King, Meisleman, & Carr, 2013) and conceptualisations (Crocker & Thomson, 2014; Thomson & Crocker, 2014; Thomson et al., 2010). Although these two approaches are essentially complementary, important phenomenological distinctions need to be drawn that could (and should) inform the researcher's choice of approach.

Notwithstanding the many uncertainties about the nature of emotion and how it should be defined (Frijda & Scherer, 2009; Thomson & Crocker, 2013), there is a consensus that an emotion is something experienced by an individual and that the emotion,

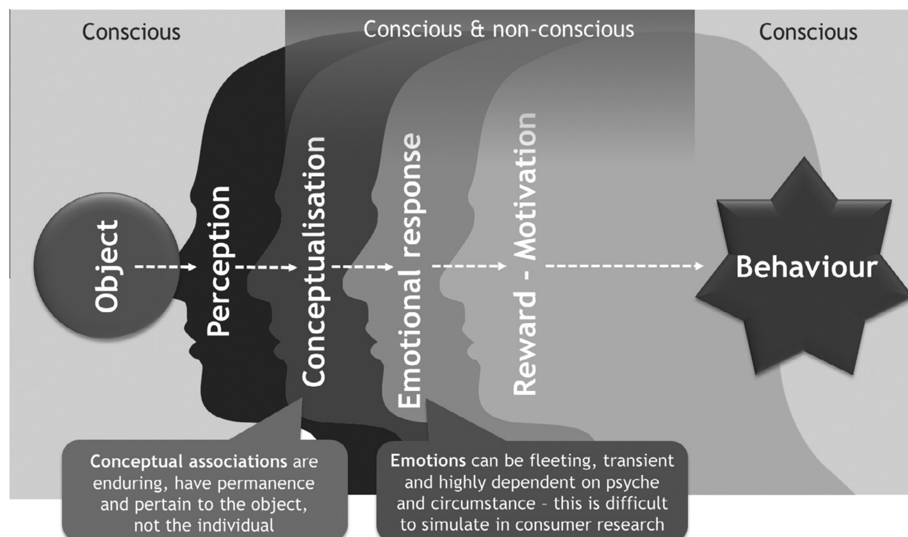

Fig. 1. Model linking sensory stimulation to consequent behaviour.

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