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Metacognition and consumer judgment: fluency is pleasant but disfluency ignites interest

Aparna A Labroo¹ and Anastasiya Pocheptsova²

Fluency arising from the ease of identifying a product or understanding the goals it serves is known to evoke positive affective responses that increase liking of products and advertising information. However, recent findings show processing disfluency can also sometimes improve evaluation. In this review, we suggest a novel approach based on the affective properties of processing experiences to integrate these opposing findings. Observing that affective experiences comprise two fundamental dimensions — pleasantness and arousal — we posit that fluency increases pleasantness by reducing uncertainty about products, but disfluency is arousing, and as a result, increases interest and engagement with products. Product evaluation depends on whether the decision is associated more with uncertainty reduction and pleasantness or with arousal and interest.

Addresses

¹ Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, 2001 Sheridan Avenue, Evanston, IL 60208, USA

² Darla Moore School of Business, University of South Carolina, 109 Green Street, Columbia, SC 29208, USA

Corresponding author: Labroo, Aparna A
(a-labroo@kellogg.northwestern.edu)

Current Opinion in Psychology 2016, **10**:154–159

This review comes from a themed issue on **Consumer behavior**

Edited by **Jeff Joireman** and **Kristina M Durante**

For a complete overview see the [Issue](#) and the [Editorial](#)

Available online 29th January 2016

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.01.008>

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Introduction

Evaluating products is a fundamental aspect of consumer decision-making. Consumers frequently encounter product information, from advertising to store displays, from social media to friend's recommendations. Product evaluation is influenced by objective content of such information and by knowledge cued in memory by it, but also by metacognitive influences that arise when processing or retrieving the information [1]. Metacognitive experiences can result from three sources — (a) the fluency with which product information is processed [2,3], (b) from the process of retrieving existing product information from memory [4], and (c) from validating ones thoughts [5]. While all three often result in similar outcomes, our

focus in this review is on fluency as it has been investigated the longest [6,7]. Also, unlike the other two metacognitive experiences, it is inherently affective [7–10], not necessarily involving inferences [1]. Fluency results when perceptual clarity of a stimulus or prior exposure to the same or related information causes facilitation in processing of the information [2] and evokes a positive affective response [6]. This positive affective response increases judged truthfulness and familiarity of information and liking of products [7]. However, a growing number of studies are also finding that processing difficulty, rather than ease, can sometimes enhance evaluation [11,12]. In this review, we summarize and then integrate these classic and emerging findings, suggesting a novel approach based on the affective properties of fluency.

Types of fluency

Perceptual fluency relates to ease of identifying the perceptual features of a product, such as its visual details, shape, size, touch or sound [2]. Perceptual fluency can arise when a stimulus is presented repeatedly [6,8]. Repeated exposures make identification of the product features easy. Perceptual fluency can also arise in a single exposure, when the perceptual features of the product are clear rather than blurry, when information is presented in an easy rather than difficult to read font, when the product is located close by rather than far away, or when background contrast is high [1]. Additionally, perceptual fluency can result without any prior exposure to the product, when consumers imagine visual identifiers of the product [13]. Thus, conceptual primes can facilitate perceptual processing. For example, priming consumers with thoughts pertaining to frogs facilitates identification and choice of a wine with a frog label. In sum, perceptual fluency is enhanced when the perceptual features of the target product become easy to identify because they are presented often, are presented clearly, or semantic cues help visualize identifiers of the target product.

Conceptual fluency relates to the ease of understanding the meaning of a product, especially the goals it serves [2,14]. Conceptual fluency can arise when consumers have recently been exposed to a competing or substitute product [2]. Product knowledge is stored in an associative network in memory and prior exposure to the target or a related product can make meaning and goals of the target product more accessible. Subsequently, when the target product is being evaluated its meaning surfaces in memory more easily. For example, exposure to advertising for Kraft mayonnaise can facilitate processing of Kraft ketchup

because the former activates Kraft products and the category of condiments in semantic memory. Conceptual fluency can also arise after exposure to generic advertising [2,15]. For example, a generic ad for beer can cue the category of beers, making it easier for consumers to subsequently understand goals associated with a particular brand of beer. Moderately accessible brands experience most facilitation because major brands are already highly accessible and minor brands are highly inaccessible in memory [16]. Another source of conceptual fluency is expectation of seeing a product [2]. An advertisement of a fast food restaurant may expect to see ketchup, making processing of ketchup more fluent when it is encountered subsequently. In sum, conceptual fluency can arise from prior exposure to the same or to related products, from category cues, or from contexts that cue expectation of the product.

Conceptual fluency is driven by ease of processing the goals associated with a product [14,17]. As a result, prior exposure to a product from a different functional category can facilitate processing of a target product when goals match, but it also can inhibit processing if the products serve conflicting goals. For example, exposure to an advertisement for not-nice-to-lice shampoo can increase liking of raid insect-killer, even though both products belong to different functional categories, by making common kill-insect goals more fluent [14]. It can also reduce liking of nurturance hair-conditioner, even though shampoo and conditioner belong to the same functional category (haircare products), because its avoid-negative outcome goals conflict with the conditioner's approach-positive outcomes goals [2,17]. Thus, conceptual fluency is goal-based, and compatibility of goals of two products increases fluency, whereas goal-conflict inhibits processing and reduces fluency.

Fluency increases pleasantness and product evaluation

More than 200 studies over the last 50 years show fluency can generate positive affect and enhance evaluation of stimuli [7,8,18]. Positive effects on evaluation have been observed with auditory stimuli, ideographs, nonsense words and syllables, photographs, meaningful words, including names, polygons, persons, and with products, logos, brand names, and objects [6,19]. They stem from a single repetition of a stimulus, or even a part of it [20], and persist after a hundred repetitions [21]. These effects are strongest when exposures are short, less than a second [10], but observed even with exposures longer than a minute [6], especially when the stimulus is intermingled among other stimuli and does not draw explicit attention and counter arguments why it is being shown repeatedly [6]. An increase is observed when evaluation is measured immediately after exposure to the stimulus or after a delay, ranging 5 min [22] to 1–2 weeks [22,23] to a year [8]. These effects occur in a range of domains, including

advertising [24], complex and novel stimuli, food products, environmental claims, aesthetic judgments, and social perceptions [6,25]. Fluency increases liking of a stimulus by activating brain areas associated with pleasure [10]. This experience of pleasure can enhance evaluations that correlate positively with liking, for example, judgments of goodness and attractiveness, and making people whose names were shown previously appear famous [26], and ad claims shown previously as true [27,28], widespread and popular [29].

A single exposure to a stimulus can similarly increase pleasantness and liking of a product and reduce choice deferral [30] when its perceptual features are presented clearly. For instance, high background contrast, a product that is located close rather than distant from a consumer [31], or information in a clear rather than blurry font [1], can increase liking of target products, believability of product reviews, and confidence [32]. Fluency associated with processing a newer or larger denomination currency can increase its perceived purchasing power and reduce desire to part with it [33,34^{*}], while shorter stock tickers can result in marketplace optimism about stock performance [32]. Conceptual fluency can similarly increase liking of a product and the ad message, create engagement with the product and increase willingness to pay for the product, and result in the message being perceived as more valid [17]. In sum, fluency resulting from repeated exposures, from clarity of the stimulus during a single exposure, or from expectation of seeing it or understanding what use it serves can evoke a positive affective response associated with pleasantness and increase corresponding evaluations of liking, popularity, fame, truthfulness, value, confidence, popularity, optimism, and unwillingness to dispose of a product [6,7].

The effect of positive affect arising from fluency on evaluation can even over-ride the meaning of objective information [13]. For example, consumers evaluate a 'frowning' watch (with hands set at 8:40) more favorably when having thoughts about frown, clock and time rather than smile, clock, and time, and more favorably than a 'smiling' watch (set at 10:10). While 'frown' is semantically negative, it describes the visual identifier of the 'frowning' watch and creates perceptual fluency that increases liking of the 'frowning' watch. Thus, perceptual fluency can over-ride the meaning associated with a product [13]. Similarly, fluency from repeated-exposure can lead to more extreme judgments on a number of dimensions, regardless of the objective positivity of the dimension. For example, dark stimuli are judged darker but light stimuli are judged lighter [35]. In addition, positive affective experiences of fluency can persist even after the objective meaning of information is forgotten. For example, among older consumers, despite warnings that ad claims are false, repeated exposures can result in the claims being perceived as truer than claims not

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