

Unconscious transfer of meaning to brands[☆]

Maria Galli^{a,*}, Gerald Gorn^b

^a Department of Marketing, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Clear Water Bay, Kowloon, Hong Kong

^b Faculty of Business and Economics, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong

Received 9 August 2010; revised 13 November 2010; accepted 30 December 2010

Available online 28 January 2011

Abstract

We examine semantic conditioning in a consumer context. We subliminally paired neutral ideographs with attributes. In experiment 1, the ideographs served as primes during a lexical decision task and slowed down response times to target words with the opposite semantic meaning. In experiment 2, the ideographs served as brand names of beverages, and attitudinal responses to them were less favorable when the associated attributes were incongruent with existing schemas. These results showed that semantic conditioning (1) can occur unconsciously, (2) can have significant and meaningful consequences for brand evaluation, and (3) influences subsequent attitudinal responses via conceptual disfluency processes.

© 2011 Society for Consumer Psychology. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Semantic conditioning; Associative learning; Unconscious processing; Subliminal

Unconscious transfer of meaning to brands

In the early 1990s, PepsiCo introduced a form of Pepsi, called Crystal Pepsi, which was clear in color. Crystal Pepsi was marketed as an alternative to normal colas, its clearness representing purity and health (Triplett, 1994). Except for its color, Crystal Pepsi did not differ significantly from the original Pepsi and tasted much like it. PepsiCo essentially introduced a new association, “clear,” with an otherwise unchanged product. Although the attribute “clear” was evaluated positively, when it was associated with a cola drink, it was not received very well. Years of exposure to dark-colored cola-flavored sodas (Pepsi Cola, Coca Cola, etc.) had resulted in a strong association between the attribute “black” and cola, and violating this association generated avoidance: Crystal Pepsi tasted like Pepsi Cola, and colas *should* be black.

This example stimulated two questions that we ask in this research. Our first question relates to what psychological

processes underlie the transfer of semantic meaning from an attribute (e.g., “clear”) to a brand (e.g., Crystal Pepsi), through exposure to multiple pairings of the two. We will refer to both the procedure of pairing a brand with a meaningful attribute and to the outcome of that brand-attribute pairing as “semantic conditioning” (e.g., Janiszewski & Warlop, 1993).¹ Because in today’s world of marketing communications, there are many elements that go by fleetingly and perhaps never enter a viewer’s realm of awareness (Hawkins, 1970; Shapiro, 1999), an important question is whether semantic conditioning can happen *unconsciously*, namely without awareness. If it turns out that it can, then we cannot avoid its influence (Shapiro, 1999). Our second question is if semantic associations that are learned unconsciously rather than consciously, unlike in the Crystal Pepsi example, would still have significant (negative) consequences for brand evaluations.

We took the view that a subliminal procedure would be the best procedure to use to address our questions. It enables an unequivocal test of whether semantic conditioning can occur

[☆] This research was supported by funds from HKUST6502/06H and HKUST6413/08H from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China.

* Corresponding author. Fax: +852 2358 2429.

E-mail address: mkgalli@ust.hk (M. Galli).

¹ Prior research has also used other terms to refer to the same phenomenon, for example, conditioning of denotative meaning (Staats, Staats, & Heard 1961) associative transfer of non-evaluative stimulus properties (Meersmans et al., 2005), and associative learning of non-evaluative covariations (Olson, Kendrick, & Fazio 2009).

unconsciously since the issue of conscious learning becomes moot if at least one of the paired stimuli is not consciously perceived during the brand-attribute pairings. Scientific research on the plausibility of subliminal persuasion has been limited (Epley, Savitsky, & Kacheliski, 1999), and to the best of our knowledge, in conditioning research, no one has attempted to use subliminal procedures for meaning transfer. We will use them to examine whether semantic meaning can be transferred unconsciously. This, however, presents a challenge. The unconscious transfer of meaning via subliminal procedures should be more difficult to demonstrate than unconscious transfer of affect, which has already proven to be difficult.² This is for two reasons. First, the cognitive interpretation of an attribute's semantic meaning should be slower than the affective response to it, presumably requiring a fair degree of higher-order, conscious processing. As an illustration, consider the attribute "clear." The cognitive interpretation of "clear" involves not only understanding that it denotes a specific color (as in "Crystal Pepsi is clear") but also appreciating the—likely various—meanings linked to it in memory (e.g., "transparent," "healthy," "good for the environment," etc.). Second, semantic meaning is less ambiguous than affect and thus less likely to be "misattributed" to a target (Jones et al., 2009; Olson, Kendrick, & Fazio, 2009; Pham, 2007; Sweldens et al., 2010). Given these reasons, a subliminal procedure represented a conservative, if risky, procedure to use in our investigation of unconscious meaning transfer.

We also test for downstream attitudinal effects of semantic conditioning. For example, if a brand has become associated with a color (even unconsciously), what evaluative implications does this have for the brand? Would the associated color impact brand evaluations positively or negatively, or would the effect be contingent on the specific product this brand represents? If the latter, it would mean that the brain can perform rather complex operations automatically. It would suggest not only that the brain *automatically* makes meaningful connections between an attribute and a brand but also, maybe more significantly yet, that the brain can even make an *unconscious yet meaningful* application of an association that was unconsciously learned.

Next, we review prior literature relevant to both the questions we are interested in.

Conscious vs. unconscious conditioning

Research examining unconscious conditioning in recent years has focused on evaluative rather than semantic conditioning. Some researchers have used subliminal procedures in an attempt to show unconscious transfer of affect (e.g., De Houwer, Baeyens, & Eelen, 1994; De Houwer, Hendrickx, & Baeyens, 1997; Dijksterhuis, 2004; Krosnick, Betz, Jussim, &

Lynn, 1992), but this research has been criticized on methodological grounds (e.g., see Lovibond & Shanks, 2002; and Pleyers, Corneille, Luminet, & Yzerbyt, 2007). Indeed, there remains an important ongoing debate in the conditioning literature about the possibility of unconscious (evaluative) conditioning, with some authors presenting evidence for unaware evaluative conditioning effects (e.g., Jones, Fazio, & Olson, 2009; Sweldens, van Osselaer, & Janiszewski, 2010) and others claiming that participants need to be contingency aware (e.g., Pleyers et al., 2007; Stahl, Unkelbach, & Corneille, 2009). Leading theorists claim that there is no convincing evidence for unaware conditioning effects at all, and the most likely theoretical account for conditioning effects in humans is propositional in nature or based on conscious thought (Hofmann, De Houwer, Perugini, Baeyens, & Crombez, 2010; Mitchell, De Houwer, & Lovibond, 2009; Shanks, 2010).

Some research has used conditioning procedures to study the transfer of semantic meaning, but with few exceptions (e.g., Olson et al., 2009), this research focused more on finding evidence of semantic conditioning than on underlying processes. There has been discussion of the role played by conscious vs. unconscious processes (e.g., Kim, Allen, & Kardes, 1996; Meersmans, De Houwer, Baeyens, Randell, & Eelen, 2005; Olson et al., 2009), and it is this discussion that motivated the use of a subliminal procedure in our research. As indicated, we use it to unequivocally test whether semantic conditioning can occur unconsciously, given that, as will be seen next in our review of the existing literature most relevant to our research, evidence of this, to date, is equivocal.

Prior research investigating semantic conditioning is relatively scarce. It includes early work by Staats, Staats, and Heard (1961) and more recent work as well. Meersmans et al. (2005) found that predictions of the gender of infants whose gender was not apparent from a picture were affected by repeatedly pairing the infant photos with pictures of clearly identifiable male or female infants. In an advertising context, Kim et al. (1996) showed that repeatedly pairing a brand of pizza delivery ("L Pizza House") with a picture of a race car increased the perception of L Pizza House as being "fast." The issue of the role of conscious vs. unconscious psychological processes was discussed in the latter two papers, but their investigation was not the main purpose of either piece of research. To the extent the data in both studies speak to the issue of conscious vs. unconscious processes, in Meersmans et al.'s (2005) experiments, evidence of semantic conditioning was found only when participants were aware that the gender neutral infant pictures had been paired with the clearly identifiable male or female infant pictures. Similarly, Kim et al. (1996) found that only participants who were aware of the L Pizza House–race car pairing acquired the belief that L Pizza House was speedy and developed more positive attitudes.

Two other studies suggest that semantic conditioning may be obtained unconsciously. In Janiszewski and Warlop's (1993) experiment 3, even though whether participants deliberately processed the contingency between the paired stimuli was not measured given that this research was concerned with other questions, the authors did suggest that the formation of

² Subliminal procedures have been used in evaluative conditioning research in attempts to show unconscious *affect* transfer (e.g., De Houwer, Baeyens, & Eelen, 1994; De Houwer, Hendrickx, & Baeyens, 1997; Dijksterhuis, 2004; Krosnick, Betz, Jussim, & Lynn, 1992), but as will be elaborated in the next section, this research is controversial.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/882272>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/882272>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)