



Increasing implicit and explicit attitudes toward an organic food brand by referencing to oneself

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ABSTRACT

In the last decades, theoretical and empirical work has been devoted to implicit attitudes toward a large range of food items. Despite the increasing development of green labels in the food market, to our knowledge no study has investigated implicit attitudes toward organic food nor has tried to change them. Capitalizing on the important role of the self in consumer or pro-environmental behavior, we aim to change or form implicit and explicit attitudes toward organic food brands using the self. Moreover, we investigate the possibility of changing hypothetical shopping behavior, brand identification, and attitude change persistence. Targeting two fictitious brands of organic food in two studies, we use the Self-Referencing (SR) task, an evaluative learning paradigm that relies on both the use of the self as a positive source of evaluation and the common action to classify the self and a target. We assess its effects on implicit attitudes, using one of the most common indirect measure (Implicit Association Test), as well as on explicit attitudes. We show that the SR manipulation results in more positive implicit attitudes, explicit attitudes, and to more frequent hypothetical choice of products for the eco-brand paired with the self compared to the other eco-brand. SR manipulation also results in higher level of brand identification. Moreover, changes in implicit attitude mediate changes in explicit attitude, identification, and hypothetical choice. Finally, we provide evidence for the persistence of the effect: Participants liked and identified more with the brand originally paired with the self even after removing the pairing with the self. The discussion is organized around the importance of taking into account implicit attitudes toward organic food brands and the usefulness of the self in changing or forming these attitudes.

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1. Introduction

When confronted to different food items at the supermarket, consumers' choices may be determined by different processes either controlled, rational, or automatic, impulsive (Epstein, 1994; Lieberman, 2003; Shiffrin & Schneider, 1977). In the first case, for example individuals can choose a product after considering specific goals, values, and beliefs, whereas in the second case, they might grab items from the shelves simply on an impulse because they like the package. In psychology, dual-process models have provided a theoretical framework for the investigation of impulsive and controlled behavior defining two systems with different processes and capacities (e.g., Fazio & Towles-Schwen, 1999; Gawronski & Bodenhausen,

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2006; Strack & Deutsch, 2004). The Impulsive system (Strack & Deutsch, 2004) or System 1 (Evans, 2003, 2008; Kahneman, 2011) integrates information in an automatic and cognitively efficient way based on associative processes whereas the Reflective system or System 2 involves slow and controlled processes that require time and cognitive resources. In the last few years, consumer researchers, economic psychologists, and economists have started to adopt the perspective of dual-process models (Alós-Ferrer & Strack, 2014; Samson & Voyer, 2012). For instance, Fudenberg & Levine's Dual Selves Model (2006) identifies different processes as reflecting the image of either a long-run or a short-run player, where a rational/controlled long-run self controls the impulses of a short-run self tempted by immediate rewards. In terms of attitude, these dual-process models have resulted in the differentiation between explicit and implicit attitudes, in reference to the deliberative and impulsive system, respectively. An implicit attitude reflects an automatic affective reaction resulting from associations activated when a person encounters an object (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). Moreover, implicit attitudes are supposed to "mediate favorable or unfavorable feeling, thought, or action toward social objects" (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995, p. 8).

1.1. Implicit attitudes: The specific case of food

The general idea that human behavior can be explained by different processes has influenced attitude research and assessment (see Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2011). In other words, the increased focus on implicit consumer cognition (Brunel, Tietje, & Greenwald, 2004) has led research to use indirect measures designed to tap into automatic processes (Frieze, Hofmann, & Wänke, 2009). Moreover, the validity of direct measures is limited by the fact that people are not always able to retrieve their attitudes in memory prior to measurement (Dholakia & Morwitz, 2002) and not necessarily willing to reveal them (Gawronski & De Houwer, 2014). Among the indirect measures of attitude, the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) is the most used and reliable paradigm (Gawronski & De Houwer, 2014). In its most common form, the IAT consists of a computerized classification task of two target categories (e.g., fruit versus snack) and two attribute categories (e.g., positive versus negative words) with a 7- or 5-block structure. The underlying logic of the IAT refers to response interference or compatibility. If one has an implicit preference for snacks over fruit, it should be easier to classify positive words and snacks with a single key and negative words and fruit with another key than to classify negative words and snacks with the same key and positive words and fruit. The easiness of the task is evaluated through reaction times and error rates and the IAT effect is defined as the difference between these two response conditions.

In the food domain, researchers started adopting indirect measures such as the IAT to tap into the automatic processes involved in consumers' behavior toward food-related targets (Frieze et al., 2009). For example, Maison, Greenwald, and Bruin (2004) demonstrated that implicit preferences toward competitor brands measured through an IAT predicted consumers' behavior over and above explicit preferences. Moreover, using a low/high calorie IAT, Maison, Greenwald, and Bruin (2001, Study 2) reported that women who prefer high-calorie over low-calorie products in terms of taste have nevertheless implicit preferences for low-calorie products. This dissociation between implicit and explicit food preferences underscores the importance of assessing both. Furthermore, empirical evidence demonstrates the validity of the IAT to predict individuals' food choices between healthy versus unhealthy goods (Conner, Perugini, O'Gorman, Ayres, & Prestwich, 2007; Frieze, Hofmann, & Wänke, 2008; Perugini, 2005, study 2; Richetin, Perugini, Prestwich, & O'Gorman, 2007; for a review see Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009), although some studies failed to do so (Karpinski & Hilton, 2001; Roefs & Jansen, 2002). In sum, because theoretical and empirical work support the importance of implicit attitudes in food related behaviors and cognitions, it seems key to consider them when examining food related cognitions. Moreover, if implicit attitudes are significant predictors of food choices, it becomes important to find procedures through which they can be changed.

1.2. Changing implicit attitudes using the self

As we mentioned earlier, an implicit attitude results from associations activated upon encounter of an object (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). Therefore, an associative-based procedure which involves the learning of a new evaluation toward the attitude object (e.g., pairing food with positive stimuli) appears to be an ideal candidate to induce implicit attitude change (Bodenhausen & Gawronski, 2013). For example, pairing a coffee with a famous and positively valued actor would elicit a more positive implicit attitude toward the coffee. Moreover, according to Gawronski and Bodenhausen's (2006, 2011) Associative-Propositional Evaluation (APE) model, changes in evaluative associations (i.e., implicit attitudes) serve as an input for deliberative evaluations (i.e., explicit attitudes) through a validation process (see also MODE model for similar flow, Fazio, 1990; Olson & Fazio, 2009). Therefore, such associative-based procedures could lead to implicit attitude as well as to explicit attitude change. In the general food domain, pairing stimuli such as sensory information or valenced images with food items through co-occurrence in space and time (i.e., evaluative conditioning procedure, see Hofmann, De Houwer, Perugini, Baeyens, & Crombez, 2010 for a review) has been shown to induce implicit attitude change toward such food items (Hollands, Prestwich, & Marteau, 2011; Lebens et al., 2011; Verhulst, Hermans, Baeyens, Spruyt, & Eelen, 2006).

Another important determinant of preferences and a main focus of research is the self. Starting from the fact that the majority of people has a high self-esteem and a general positive view of themselves (e.g., Yamaguchi et al., 2007), the self has been demonstrated to affect liking toward self-related objects such that for example individuals usually overvalue their own-name letters compared to other letters (Hoorens & Nuttin, 1993; Nuttin, 1985). In economic psychology literature, this effect has been defined as the endowment effect (e.g., Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1990) and its underlying mechanism has

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