Master's Seminar in Behavioral Marketing:

A Selection of Previously Offered Topics

Updated on November 16, 2023
Prof. Dr. Miguel Brendl

Table of Contents

Topic 1: How plant-based Products conquer Supermarkets

There has been a substantial increase of vegan / plant-based products in the past decade as consumers become more aware of ethical, environmental and health consequences of consuming animal products. While many consumers still have prejudices against vegan products, marketers succeed in increasing sales numbers of vegan products and position new vegan products in the shelves of supermarkets. Leveraging on this trend, marketers use all kinds of marketing strategies and product features to not only target vegan consumers, but to also target non-vegan / conventional consumers. Some new brands established themselves successfully in the market as vegan brands while other well-established retail brands added a range of vegan products to their assortment.

Your task is to review the literature on vegan products and brands to investigate how marketers overcome prejudices and make vegan products attractive. You may choose to focus on one product category. Interesting questions to investigate would be for instance: which strategies do marketers use to sell vegan products (also to non-vegan consumers)? Which product features do marketers use to make vegan products appealing? How do consumers react to specific features of such products? Develop a study design to test your hypothesis.

You could investigate one of the following hypotheses:

1. The more similar a vegan product looks to a non-vegan product, the more likely is a non-vegan consumer to buy a vegan product.
2. Non-vegan consumers have a higher willingness to buy a vegan product if it is claimed to be “plant-based” than if it is claimed to be “vegan”.
3. The more appealing the product packaging of a vegan product looks, the more likely are non-vegan consumers to try the vegan product.

References:

Apostolidis, C., & McLeay, F. (2016). It's not vegetarian, it's meat-free! Meat eaters, meat reducers and vegetarians and the case of Quorn in the UK. Social Business, 6(3), 267-290.

Beverland, M. B. (2014). Sustainable eating: mainstreaming plant-based diets in developed economies. Journal of Macromarketing, 34(3), 369-382.

Fuentes, C., & Fuentes, M. (2017). Making a market for alternatives: Marketing devices and the qualification of a vegan milk substitute. Journal of Marketing Management, 33(7-8), 529-555.

Lea, E. J., Crawford, D., & Worsley, A. (2006). Public views of the benefits and barriers to the consumption of a plant-based diet. European journal of clinical nutrition, 60(7), 828-837.

Topic 2: Curiosity in Marketing and Consumer Behavior

Sometimes brands try to prompt interest in a product or service by giving away only a little bit of information about it. This is a tactic to elicit curiosity. Curiosity is elicited when there is a discrepancy between what someone knows and what someone would like to know; also called a knowledge gap (Loewenstein, 1994). In order to close this knowledge gap, people strive to obtain more information. To do so, they have to interact in some way with the firm that provides the product (e.g., go to the brand's website to obtain more information). Companies intend to eventually increase motivation to purchase.

Another example for curiosity after the purchase decision might be the following: imagine you buy a new pair of shoes. A few days after you bought the shoes you get an email from the shoe store claiming that selected brands are now 50% off. Will you open the email to check whether your new shoes are now discounted? Opening the email might be painful as you might receive the information that you paid double the price compared to what it is now.

Your task is to review the literature on curiosity, how brands make use of curiosity and to investigate how curiosity can influence consumer behavior. Develop a study design to test your hypothesis. One hypothesis you could investigate is the following (related to above shoe example): consumers search for desired information due to curiosity even when the predicted outcome of receiving the desired information is negative.

Closely related concepts you can also read about are knowledge gap, mystery appeal, need for cognition and ambiguity aversion.

References:

Hill, K.M., Fombelle, P.W., & Sirianni, N.J. (2016). Shopping under the influence of curiosity: How retailers use mystery to drive purchase motivation. Journal of Business Research, 69, 1028–1034.

Laran, J., & Tsiros, M. (2013). An investigation of the effectiveness of uncertainty in marketing promotions involving free gifts. Journal of Marketing, 77(2), 112-123.

Loewenstein, G. (1994). The Psychology of curiosity: A review and reinterpretation. Psychological Bulletin, 116(1), 75–98.

Menon, S., & Soman, D. (2002). Managing the power of curiosity for effective web advertising strategies. Journal of Advertising, 31(3), 1–14.

Park, S.-H., Mahony, D.F., Kim, Y., & Kim, Y.D. (2015). Curiosity generating advertisements and their impact on sport consumer behavior. Sport Management Review, 18(3), 359–369.

Wang, C. (2019). How does incidental curiosity affect consumers' unhealthy eating? Journal of Consumer Marketing, 36(6), 784–793.

Topic 3: Money: a Powerful and Unique Reward

Economic theory assumes decreasing marginal value of money, each additional dollar has a bit less utility. Yet, there are situation where marginal utility of money may in fact increase. In a gambling casino an initial small winning may get a person "hot" on gambling more, that is, increase the desire to win more money. Why is that? Does the utility of money increase or is this phenomenon due to other non-monetary rewards?

Further, money can be exchanged for goods or services – and in this respect is instrumental, but it also seems to have its own motivational properties that can be comparable to those of drugs, as the gambling example above suggests (Lea & Webley, 2006). In the past decades, the concept of money has changed since electronic money has been introduced. There still is a rapid growth of different forms of digital money, which lead to a shift in valuing money and spending habits (Roberts & Jones, 2001). Also, people seem to exhibit little satiation to money.

Your task is to review the literature on money to investigate what underlying factors make money such a strong and unique motivator. For instance, you could investigate the following question: how does a small amount of money impact subsequent behavior? For example in an experimental setup, does giving participants a small amount of money ("money appetizer") increase their motivation to subsequently earn more money compared to participants who do not get a small amount of money in advance? Conclude with your own hypothesis and develop a study design to test your hypothesis.

References:

Camera, G., Casari, M., & Bigoni, M. (2013). Money and trust among strangers. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 110(37), 14889-14893.

Furnham, A. (1984). Many sides of the coin: The psychology of money usage. Personality and individual Differences, 5(5), 501-509.

Griffiths, M., & Parke, A. (2008). Internet Gambling. In Encyclopedia of Internet Technologies and Applications (pp. 228-234). IGI Global.

Krug, M. K., & Braver, T. S. (2014). Motivation and cognitive control: Going beyond monetary incentives. In The psychological science of money (pp. 137-162). Springer, New York, NY.

Lea, S. E. G., & Webley, P. (2006). Money as Tool, Money as Drug: The Biological Psychology of a Strong Incentive. Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 29(April), 161-209.

McClure, S. M., Laibson, D. I., Loewenstein, G., & Cohen, J. D. (2004). Separate neural systems value immediate and delayed monetary rewards. Science, 306, 503-507.

Mead, N. L., & Stuppy, A. (2014). Two sides of the same coin: Money can promote and hinder interpersonal processes. In The Psychological Science of Money (pp. 243-262). Springer New York.

Park, J., Lee, C., & Thomas, M. (2021). Why do cashless payments increase unhealthy consumption? The decision-risk inattention hypothesis. Journal of the Association for Consumer Research, 6(1), 21-32.

Roberts, J. A., & Jones, E. (2001). Money attitudes, credit card use, and compulsive buying among American college students. Journal of consumer affairs, 35(2), 213-240.

Topic 4: Relation of Predicted Pleasure and Motivation

The objective is to examine in specific consumption contexts whether predicted pleasure to consume and motivation can diverge even when both reactions target the same consumption object. This is of interest to marketing practice because motivation may relate to willingness to buy, whereas pleasure may relate to satisfaction with the consumption experience and thus to loyalty, hence, to different stages of "the consumer decision journey". Further, if pleasure and motivation can diverge, marketing actions may increase one at the expense of the other. As another example, a social marketing domain where a divergence of pleasure and motivation is highly relevant concerns compulsive consumption behaviors, such as overeating. Finally, the question of divergence is of theoretical importance because most models of choice, including in economics, assume at least implicitly that predicted pleasure and motivation would be aligned.

References:

Berridge, K. C., & Aldridge, J. W. (2008). Decision utility, the brain, and the pursuit of hedonic goals. *Social Cognition*, *26*(5), 621-646.

Kringelbach, M. L. (2014). 11 Balancing Consumption: Brain Insights from Pleasure Cycles. The Interdisciplinary Science of Consumption, 199.

Preston, S. D., Preston, S. D., Kringelbach, M. L., & Knutson, B. (Eds.). (2014). The interdisciplinary science of consumption. MIT Press.

Topic 4.1: Effect of having watched few or many episodes of a Netflix series

Imagine you have watched the 3rd episode of a series on Netflix. How desperately would you want to watch the 4th episode? How much pleasure would you predict from watching it? As a thought experiment, let us give both a number of 6 on a scale of 1-10. Now imagine you have watched the 30th episode. Answer the same two questions for watching the 31st episode. Let us assume that now your desire to watch would be at 7 whereas you would predict pleasure of only 5. Why would you want to watch something more than the pleasure you expect from it? Wouldn't this be paradoxical? It would, but such a phenomenon seems intuitively possible. The objective of this project is to empirically test if this type of effects exists, and to theoretically speculate why it may exist. One possible direction is that curiosity is larger after the 30th episode, yet, maybe curiosity is not solely driven by pleasure. It will probably be easier to plan your experiment with stimuli other than movies, e.g., a series of images. Hsee and Ruan's (2016) Study 4 could serve as model: There, on each trial participants saw tiles with titles (e.g., mosquito) and had to decide if they wanted to turn the tile around and see the image on the backside of the tile (i.e., of a mosquito) or rather move on to the next tile. However, you would need to think about how to change this paradigm, importantly, finding a way to turn the images into a sequel. Joo, Liu and Wilbur (2020) reported a related experimental paradigm where they showed sequences of real TV-advertisements to participants, and measured liking of the advertisements and wanting of the advertised products. Liking (pleasure) was relatively higher early in the sequence and

wanting (motivation) late in the sequence. These authors propose an explanation in terms of different mechanisms of habituation and appetizing.

References:

Hsee, C. K., & Ruan, B. (2016). The Pandora Effect: The Power and Peril of Curiosity. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *27*(5), 659-666.

Joo, M., Liu, W., & Wilbur, K. C. (2020). Divergent temporal courses for liking versus wanting in response to persuasion. Emotion, 20(March), 261-270.

Lu, J., Karmarkar, U., & Venkatraman, V. (2017). Planning to binge: How consumers choose to allocate time to view sequential versus independent media content. ACR North American Advances.

McSweeney, F. K., & Swindell, S. (1999). General-process theories of motivation revisited: the role of habituation. Psychological bulletin, 125(4), 437.

Nelson, L. D., & Meyvis, T. (2008). Interrupted consumption: Disrupting adaptation to hedonic experiences. Journal of Marketing Research, 45(6), 654-664.

Woolley, K., & Sharif, M. A. (2022). Down a rabbit hole: how prior media consumption shapes subsequent media consumption. Journal of Marketing Research, 59(3), 453-471.

Topic 4.2: Effects of visual artwork: signaling aesthetics (pleasure) versus the motivation for visual consumption

The perception of visual artwork is strongly dependent on consumers' preferences. A piece of art might be appealing to some consumers while it might be less appealing to others. However, this might be independent from the urge to visually consume / to look at an artwork. For instance, a painting may not provide aesthetic pleasure, but at the same time may evoke a motivational desire to look at it. The same psychological mechanisms may be involved when consumers look at a product design. For instance, car manufacturers need to decide whether to launch a new car with an unusual design which on the one hand would draw attention, on the other hand may (or may not) be disliked. Further, a design that may seem strange when first launched, can become normal after some time. You could decide to investigate artwork or product designs, yet, you will find more research on artwork, and more extreme "designs" in art, which is advantageous for research.

Your task is to review the literature on motivation, art, design, and aesthetics to investigate whether artwork exists that, paradoxically, may evoke the desire to look at it despite low aesthetic pleasure. You may choose to focus on only one type of artwork (e.g. paintings or sculptures). You can examine whether specific features or cues exist that concern aesthetic pleasure, others that concern motivation/desire, and yet others that concern both. Phrased differently, do cues exist that can vary independently and elicit opposing consequences? For instance, the prototypicality of a cue may be crucial. Artwork which is highly prototypical might be perceived as visually pleasing, but not evoke the desire to look at it. Hence, you could investigate the following hypotheses:

1. The less prototypical an artwork is, the less aesthetically pleasing it is.
2. The less prototypical an artwork is, the higher is the desire to look at it.

Develop a research design to test if visually unpleasant artwork paradoxically has the ability to evoke the desire to visually consume it. One possibility would be to test your

hypothesis with images of paintings and simple ratings such as “how aesthetically pleasing do you find this painting?” (pleasure) vs. “how long would you look at this painting?”, or “how interesting is this painting” (motivation).

References:

Cupchik, G. C., & Gebotys, R. J. (1990). Interest and pleasure as dimensions of aesthetic response. Empirical Studies of the Arts, 8(1), 1-14.

Dai, X., Brendl, C. M., & Ariely, D. (2010). Wanting, liking, and preference construction. *Emotion*, *10*(3), 324-334.

Graf, L. K., & Landwehr, J. R. (2015). A dual-process perspective on fluency-based aesthetics: The pleasure-interest model of aesthetic liking. Personality and social psychology review, 19(4), 395-410.

Hagtvedt, H., Patrick, V. M., & Hagtvedt, R. (2008). The perception and evaluation of visual art. Empirical studies of the arts, 26(2), 197-218.

Martindale, C. (2001). How does the brain compute aesthetic experience. The General Psychologist, 36, 25-35.

Martindale, C., & Moore, K. (1988). Priming, prototypicality, and preference. Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance, 14(4), 661.

Tschacher, W., Greenwood, S., Kirchberg, V., Wintzerith, S., van den Berg, K., & Tröndle, M. (2012). Physiological correlates of aesthetic perception of artworks in a museum. Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts, 6(1), 96.

Topic 5: Understanding Sampling Decision Effect

Recent literature documented an increased liking for information or outcome sources (i.e., person, brand, information source, etc.) due to the mere act of selecting them while exploring alternative options. For example, gamblers may develop a preference for a slot machine they selected in comparison with another one they might have used just because it was the only one available, even if both machines exhibit the same winning probability. Such an increased liking goes above and beyond the positive consequences of the selection (i.e., the winning probability). So far, the same literature provided a tentative explanation based on Thurstonian versus Brunswikian uncertainty. The first one refers to moment-to-moment fluctuations in a target construct (i.e., evaluation of the slot machine) that depend only on the “internal” working of the perceiver’s mind. The second refers to variations in the target construct depending on “external” factors (i.e. preferring slot machines with higher winning probability). This explanation is based on yoked conditions in which a participant passively “replays” the experimental run of another student, therefore sharing the same Brunswikian “external” factors (i.e., winning probability) but not the Thurstonian “internal” ones (i.e., moment-to-moment evaluation’s variations). However, a definitive explanation of this effect is still missing.

The present project aims at understanding the causes of Sampling Decision Effects and/or exploring its down-streaming consequences in many domains (i.e., consumer choices, fake news, media consumption, etc.). For example, people sometimes browse social media content on their own, while sometimes they passively receive them (i.e., shared by a friend on social media). According to an explanation of the Sampling Decision Effect based on Thurstonian and Brunswikian uncertainty, an Instagram post consumed deliberately should be liked more than the same post shared by someone else. Is this the case? Does this effect generalize from liking trustworthiness judgments (i.e., believing in specific news pieces)?

References:

Hütter, M., Niese, Z. A., & Ihmels, M. (2022). Bridging the gap between autonomous and predetermined paradigms: The role of sampling in evaluative learning. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 151*(8), 1972–1998.

Topic 6: Customer-facing use of Explainable Artificial Intelligence (XAI) in the Banking System

[no math/coding required] Mortgage or loan denial might be a perfectly legit business decision. However, there is no doubt that such a decision has consequences in terms of brand perception as the bank's brand will be inevitably stained in the eye of the customer. Moreover, such decisions are often made relying on artificial intelligence tools, which are viewed as uninterpretable "black boxes". This latter features makes very hard for customers to understand the reasons behind approval decisions. Explainable artificial intelligence aims at making the reasons behind these decisions accessible to non-technical users, which might be a way to prevent brand perception backlashes after credit denial.

The goal of this project is to understand how XAI approaches might be applied in customer-facing settings to tailor the information flow available to customers. The selection of the most promising approach, the tailoring of information format, and the moment in which information is available are all potential targets of empirical research.

References:

https://towardsdatascience.com/understanding-model-predictions-with-lime-a582fdff3a3b
https://towardsdatascience.com/the-shapley-value-for-ml-models-f1100bff78d1

Topic 7: Evaluative Conditioning along the Marketing Funnel/Customer Journey

The ways in which people associate features (i.e., evaluations, traits, attitudes, etc.) to target objects (i.e., brands, attitude targets, unconditioned stimuli, etc.) have been investigated extensively. Associative and propositional learning are the two predominant classes that collect such processes, and much is known about how they work from a cognitive point of view. In the case of associative learning, the temporal/spatial co-occurrence of an unconditioned stimulus (i.e., US such as a new brand) and a conditioned stimulus (i.e., CS such as a smiling customer) is considered a sufficient condition for the transfer of a feature of the US to the CS. In the case of propositional learning, the observer is expected to naturally form a proposition binding the US and CS (i.e., "if I buy the product, I'll smile as the customer") which is responsible for the feature transfer. However, empirical investigation regarding "where" these macro-processes are most inhibited/enhanced along the Marketing Funnel/Customer Journey is still lacking. Different stages of the Marketing Funnel (or Customer Journey) imply different levels of information availability, ranging from high information scarcity to information overload, and imply variable association strength and evaluation stability, ranging from non-existing to crystallized evaluation/association. Therefore, the two learning processes are expected to work best at different levels of the Marketing Funnel (or Customer Journey).

The present project aims at mapping ideal stage/process matches and at investigating the reasons why one process might be superior to the other along to the Marketing Funnel (or Customer Journey). On one hand, associative learning might work best at the beginning of the funnel as customers might lack the cognitive resources to develop propositions for each available brand. Similarly, propositional learning might work best later in the funnel as customers had more time to develop such propositions. On the other hand, early-developed

propositions might give marketers a stronger grip on customers' decisions. Knowing which of the two processes would be best at different steps of the Customer Journey is valuable knowledge that could be obtained empirically.

References:

Hütter, M. (2022). An integrative review of dual-and single-process accounts of evaluative conditioning. Nature Reviews Psychology, 1(11), 640-653.

Topic 8: The Price of Privacy

Privacy is becoming ever more of a commodity while losing its original status as a right. Simple actions such as payment transactions and browsing the web leave digital footprints which can tell a lot about intimate aspects of the customer. Such footprints are systematically harnessed by firms that collect, use, and sell them for profit.

Tools to prevent such information collection are available but their adoption rate remains relatively low. For example, cryptocurrencies are accepted by a growing number of retailers, and browser such as Tor allows for surfing the web anonymously. However, both technologies demand a "price" in terms of user experience. Indeed, setting up crypto-wallets might appear cumbersome to new users, and the proxy systems on which Tor is based impose slower loading of each new web page.

Existing literature already investigated some of the factors driving the adoption of privacy-centered tools, but a proper way to assess the "cost" of adopting such technologies is still missing. In other terms, there is still no way to estimate "how high is the entry bar" for the adopter's communities. Assessing this cost could be of interest to marketers interested in promoting (or designing) one of such technologies. For example, while a plethora of cryptocurrencies exists, none of them is explicitly designed (or marketed) for the user-friendliness of its wallet. The present project aims at assessing how much a customer is willing to "pay" in terms of increased waiting time (or other quantifiable metrics) while using a privacy-focused browser, and/or how much a customer is willing to "pay" in terms of increased steps (i.e., two-factor authorization) while performing transactions or setting up crypto wallets.

References:

Alzahrani, S., & Daim, T. U. (2019, August). Analysis of the cryptocurrency adoption decision: Literature review. In 2019 Portland International Conference on Management of Engineering and Technology (PICMET) (pp. 1-11). IEEE.

Story, P., Smullen, D., Chen, R., Acquisti, A., Cranor, L. F., Sadeh, N., & Schaub, F. (2022). Increasing Adoption of Tor Browser Using Informational and Planning Nudges. Proceedings on Privacy Enhancing Technologies, 2, 152-183.

Topic 9: The Face of Advertising

Testimonials or celebrity endorsements are very common in advertisements. Pairing a product with a renowned celebrity, or a logo of a brand with a happy customer makes the perceiver project a feature of the testimonial/celebrity to the brand/product. The scientific explanation of such a process lies in evaluative conditioning, the transfer of (positive) valence from one object to another. The process is straightforward, but which kind of features can or cannot be transferred still needs to be explored. Most of the scientific literature limited its investigation to the transfer of valence, and only a minority extended its scope to features other than that. Little is known about which features can be reliably transferred to a brand. However, knowing which features can (or cannot) be transferred is crucial in planning this kind of advertisement campaign. Indeed, if marketers know that a specific feature cannot be transferred from the testimonial to the brand, they can select an alternative strategy that better suits the campaign objective. The present project aims at understanding the scope of feature transfer in this kind of setting.

This project aims at assessing the evaluative shift along the different dimensions of brand perception as a consequence of pairing a brand with a testimonial. Evaluating brand perception before and after the pairing, and asking the perceiver to rate the features of the testimonial along different dimensions, will help us make inferences on which testimonial features can affect brand perception.

References:

Richter, B., & Hütter, M. (2021). Learning of affective meaning: revealing effects of stimulus pairing and stimulus exposure. Cognition and Emotion, 35(8), 1588-1606.