



Automatic Thinking as a Precursor for Consumer Decisions

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Abstract

Automatic thinking is a precursor for an individual's actions and choices. Avoiding cognitive overload in a world that requires many micro-decisions every day is crucial and thus the brain relies on heuristics to efficiently deal with choices without conscious deliberation. Within consumer behavior, automatic thinking plays an integral role in determining purchases. This manifests through schemas based on familiarity and emotional associations. Marketers can capitalize on this tendency of automatic thinking through the strategic use of advertisement and product placements, priming consumers to favor certain brands over others. Techniques such as habituation and recency also aid in embedding consumer preferring and driving purchasing behavior. While automatic thinking can allow for fostering brand loyalty and making good decisions quickly, this reliance can also introduce biases. This review article aims to explore the psychological mechanisms underlying automatic consumer behavior, creating awareness in how marketing strategies can influence purchasing decisions.

Keywords: Automatic Thinking; Consumer Behavior; Heuristics; Brand Loyalty; Biases; Purchasing Decisions

Introduction

Throughout the day, individuals are constantly making decisions, from what to have for breakfast to which car to buy. All of these micro decisions require a great deal of information to be processed which is simply not possible. In such cases, the mind relies on its past knowledge to make quick decisions. This is a process called automatic thinking. Automatic thinking is a fundamental cognitive process that is reflexive, unconscious, and inadvertent. This form of cognition is characterized by its speed and reliance on heuristics, which are mental shortcuts that simplify decision-making and problem-solving [1]. In contrast, controlled thinking involves a deliberate and thoughtful manner of processing information [2]. It is quite beneficial to understand the distinction between these two modes of thinking since they play significant roles in various aspects of one's life, including consumer behavior.

Historically, the concept of automatic thinking has evolved through cognitive psychology research. Early

studies highlighted its implications in social cognition, where automatic processes often shape our perceptions and judgment about others [3]. Automatic thinking is influenced by cognitive phenomena such as schemas, which are mental frameworks that help individuals organize information. The interplay of automatic thinking with priming and the recency effect drives consumer decision making. Priming is the unconscious tendency of one's environment to affect subsequent judgment [4]. Similarly, the recency effect demonstrates the disproportionate influence of recent information on one's thoughts and decisions [5]. An example of this is the store layout and its influence of consumer behavior [6]. Priming individuals with slogans and advertising, store owners can promote purchasing behavior, particularly impulse purchases.

The substantial implications of automatic thinking on consumer behavior can be seen in impulsive purchasing decisions for instance, which is often based on emotional responses rather than rational evaluations [7]. This article aims to explore these mechanisms and implications of

automatic thinking that dictates consumer behavior to deepen the understanding surrounding decision making.

Automatic Thinking: Theoretical Framework

At its core, automatic thinking is closely linked to schemas which are mental frameworks that help individuals categorize and interpret experiences. Schemas enable consumers to make quick judgments about products and brands based on prior knowledge and emotional associations, often without conscious deliberation [8]. Due to the overload of information, especially in a marketing setting, these schemas can be an efficient tool to make decisions without cognitive overload [8]. For example, a consumer would automatically prefer a familiar brand over a new one due to positive past experiences encoded in their schemas.

Schemas interplay differently with high involvement and low involvement purchases. In low involvement purchases, schemas are likely to play a greater role since the decision is not one of importance. This could include everyday items such as toothpaste, coffee, cornflakes and so on. In these cases, brand familiarity and product placements play a greater role. However, high involvement purchases such as cars, laptops, houses, require significantly more deliberation often placing emphasis on controlled thinking. Technology is also an important factor in consumer decision making given that easier access to information can allow a thorough deliberation process on the part of the consumer [9]. Furthermore, the satisfactory criteria for high involvement purchases are greater and thus it stands to reason that individuals are more likely to place more importance on the decision making process for the same [10]. This is not to say schemas do not play a role in high involvement purchases. There is considerable research that 'opinion leaders' often influence purchases in high-involvement purchases [11].

Research shows that cognitive shortcuts are created through marketing and product placement which creates automatic response [12]. The employment of recency and priming are clear in this aspect through their creation of associations within memory [13]. For example, exposure to advertisements featuring specific brands can prime consumers to favor these brands during purchasing decisions. Such automatic processes suggest the efficiency of automatic thinking in navigating complex consumer environments, allowing people to make quick decisions based on their instinct rather than a thorough analysis. A reliance on these heuristics helps process information and avoid paralysis of information [12].

Heuristics also play a role in the turn towards trend chasing. The Bandwagon effect, a part of heuristics, explains

the inherent tendency of individuals to follow what others are doing without putting any thought behind why Cherry K [14]. Trends such as the sudden popularity of Stanley cups, the coquette aesthetic, K-pop and K-dramas, the rise of Sabrina Carpenter and so on can at least in part be attributed to heuristics.

The implications of automatic thinking extend beyond individual decisions. They also include broader behavioral patterns. Automatic thoughts can lead to biases in judgment, such as favoring familiar brands or products without critical evaluation [15]. This reliance on automaticity can result in impulsive purchasing behaviors, particularly when consumers are faced with time constraint and overwhelming options. Research has suggested that individuals who exhibit higher levels of impulsivity are more susceptible to automatic thinking processes, leading to decisions that might not align with their long-term preference or values [16] This interplay between automatic thinking and consumer behavior highlights the need for marketers to understand how these cognitive processes influence purchasing decisions.

Automaticity in Consumer Decision-Making

Automatic thinking significantly influences consumer-decision making by facilitating rapid and habitual choices. This allows consumers to rely on established preferences and past experiences when selecting products, often leading to brand loyalty. This is supported by the mere exposure effect which suggests that repeated exposure to a stimulus increases an individual's preference for it [17]. Research shows that consumers often make decisions based on instinctive reactions rather than thorough evaluations, leading to impulsive purchases [18].

Key studies have shown how unconscious processes, such as priming and memory retrieval, affect brand recall and product preference. For example, Woodside, et al. [15] proposed that automaticity influences buyer behavior through various cognitive processes, including automatic analysis of benefits associated with products. Their research suggests that when faced with purchasing decisions, consumers are likely to automatically retrieve names of stores or brands that align with their needs based on previous experiences [15]. This retrieval highlights the efficiency of automatic thinking in guiding consumer choices, as people can access relevant information without engaging in conscious deliberation.

However, the reliance of automatic thinking also raises concerns about potential biases and irrational decision-making patterns. Consumers may fall prey to cognitive biases such as the sunk cost fallacy, where they continue investing in a product or brand due to prior commitments rather than

rational assessments of current value [16]. This tendency shows the importance of understanding how automatic thinking shapes not only individual choices but also broader market dynamics. As marketers seek to harness the power of automaticity in consumer behavior, they must remain aware of its implications for fostering both positive and negative purchasing behaviors.

Role of Marketing in Shaping Automatic Thinking

Moreover, the role of marketing strategies in shaping automatic thinking is equally important. Marketers often leverage techniques such as advertising repetition and visual cues to create strong associations between brands and positive attitudes [17]. One of the primary methods through which marketing exerts this influence is through advertising, which often relies on repetition and emotional appeal to create strong automatic associations between brands and positive attributes [18]. Consistent exposure to a brand's advertisements can lead to increased familiarity, making consumers more likely to choose that brand when making purchasing decisions [19]. For instance, effective advertising can prime consumers to associate specific emotions or benefits with a brand, leading to increased likelihood of purchases without a need for extensive cognitive functioning [20]. This interplay shows how consumer preferences can be influenced by external stimuli that activate existing schemas.

The interaction of schemas, priming, and heuristics with consumer products is particularly evident when comparing low and high-involvement purchases. For low-involvement purchases consumers tend to rely on heuristics and visual cues, often triggered by pre-existing schemas [21]. A study conducted by Singh and Srivastava in 2011, suggested that the strategic use of colors, like blue in detergent packaging evokes associations with cleanliness and trust, priming consumers to perceive the product as effective. Similarly, vibrant colors like red or yellow capture attention quickly, aligning with impulse buying behaviors [22]. These cues work effectively as low-involvement decisions typically require minimal cognitive effort, relying heavily on automatic thinking.

In contrast, high-involvement purchases such as electronics or vehicles involve more deliberate thought. As noted by Babu [23], trust and brand loyalty are central to influencing decisions for such products (2014). Strategic advertising, such as associating a car brand with safety through calming colors like blue, reinforces schemas about reliability and quality [23]. Additionally, heuristics like 'higher price equals better quality' provide individuals with cognitive shortcuts for evaluating complex options.

Product placement is another effective marketing strategy that utilizes automatic thinking. By embedding products within popular media, marketers can create subconscious connections between the product and desirable lifestyles or emotions portrayed in the content. This technique not only enhances brand visibility but also primes consumers to associate the product with positive feelings or social status, influencing their purchasing decisions unconsciously [24]. Research has shown that consumers often recall products seen in movies or television shows more readily than those encountered in traditional advertising contexts [25]. This again suggests the power of automatic thinking in shaping consumer preferences based on contextual cues.

Additionally, visual cues in marketing further exemplifies how automatic thinking can be harnessed to influence consumer behavior. Visual elements such as colors, logos, and packaging design can evoke specific emotions and memories that drive purchasing decisions. For example, studies have indicated that certain colors can elicit emotional responses—red may evoke excitement, while blue may induce calmness—thus affecting consumers' perceptions of a brand [26]. When consumers encounter these visual cues, their automatic thinking processes engage, often leading to quick judgments about the product's quality or suitability without conscious deliberation.

Another way marketers can benefit from automatic thinking is through subscription renewal. Consumers are more likely to continue paying for a subscription if it is automatically renewed without paying attention to whether the service is required any longer. This is because the act of canceling the subscription requires some deliberation. Individuals are more likely to maintain inertia, which is the tendency of individuals to resist change when there is no psychological motivation for it [27].

Moreover, understanding the interplay between automatic and controlled thinking is essential for marketers aiming to influence consumer behavior effectively. Marketers must recognize that while they can shape automatic thoughts through strategic messaging and branding efforts, these thoughts are susceptible to future self-examination. Consumers may later reflect on their choices and reassess their preferences based on new information or experiences [20]. Thus, creating a strong initial impression through automaticity is crucial for long-term brand loyalty.

Future Research

Automatic thinking in consumer behavior is a vast field of study with several opportunities for future research. One area that may benefit from further study is the role of cultural variables in shaping an individual's automatic

thought process and consumer behavior. Culture often dictates how individuals interpret symbols and colors and advertisements [28]. Thus it would be critical to understand if some cultural groups would be more receptive to certain marketing strategies or inversely, more repelled.

Furthermore, considering how the consumer market has evolved over the past 20 years, it is important to consider the role of digital spaces in buying behavior. Digital nudging is the use of technology-based cues that employ priming as means to 'nudge' people towards making purchasing decisions [29-32]. However, the barrier created by e-commerce is likely to have an effect on consumer behavior. Understanding this interplay between automatic and controlled thinking in a digital space may help marketers understand a new way of reaching their audiences. This is especially the case for older individuals who are distrustful of new technology.

Finally, it has been firmly established that automatic thinking in consumer behavior exists and this promotes brand loyalty, however it is possible for individuals to defect. Understanding what factors cause individuals to finally give up their brand loyalty - whether it be economical, social, age-related, etc, may help markets prevent a mass exodus.

Conclusion

In summation, automatic thinking can profoundly aid in shaping consumer behavior, allowing consumers to effortlessly make complex decisions. Mental mechanisms such as schemas, priming and heuristics simplify consumer choices. This leads to brand loyalty, habit formation and impulsivity. While this is usually quite beneficial in avoiding a cognitive overload, through biases and inertia, consumers can make less rational decisions. Marketers can benefit from these automatic processes through strategic advertising and guide a consumer's unconscious preference. An understanding of this process can aid marketers in creating impactful initial impressions that can withstand deliberate information processing. By employing automatic thinking, marketers can not only shape what consumers buy but also how they feel and perceive these products creating a lasting influence that transcends the transaction.

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