

Counting every thought: What consumers see when looking at ads

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Thought-listing exercises are frequently used by researchers to gauge people's reactions to advertisements. But a new paper in the June 2008 issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research* from the Wharton School of Business suggests two alternative methods that may more accurately reveal what consumers actually notice.

“Despite their success in predicting attitudes, thought-listing techniques are suspect because thought-listing relies on intentional retrieval from memory to report internal cognitive processing, and this intentional retrieval has the potential to introduce bias,” write Yanliu Huang and J. Wesley Hutchinson (University of Pennsylvania).

In other words, responses can be tainted by reluctance to list thoughts that might be considered socially inappropriate. Or, people might simply be forgetful. New thoughts that were not present during ad exposure may also be introduced.

“To address these concerns, our research explores new implicit measures of cognitive responses that focus on detecting the memory traces left by thoughts during ad exposure that are less susceptible to the contaminating biases of introspection,” the researchers write.

In one study, Huang and Hutchinson had participants look at an ad with information about hepatitis C, including common sources of infection and preventive behaviors. The ad featured a photo in which either a male or female spokesperson was exercising.

After viewing the ad for 1.5 minutes, one group of participants was asked to do a traditional “thought listing” task, providing in their own words, “Your first thought . . .” and so on. Another group of participants did a “belief verification” exercise, responding to statements about how they perceived hepatitis C and the spokesperson.

As the researchers explain: “We found that thought-listing failed to capture specific cognitive responses known to affect attitudes,” specifically, participants’ perceptions of similarity between themselves and the gender of the spokesperson.

They continue: “Implicit indexes are likely to perform better than explicit indexes when people are unable to access their thoughts directly, when their responses are nonverbal, and when social norms make people unwilling to report their thoughts.”

Citation: Yanliu Huang and J. Wesley Hutchinson, “Counting Every Thought: Implicit Measures of Cognitive Responses to Advertising.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: June 2008.

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