

Marketing Researcher Takes on Human Decision Making Process

December 23 2009, By Rebecca Ruiz-McGill

(PhysOrg.com) -- A new study by Jesper Nielsen, a UA marketing professor and his colleague are shedding light on why people decide to avoid or gravitate to a consumer product.

Analyzing the human decision making process is a complicated effort, but one that University of Arizona Marketing Professor Jesper Nielsen and his colleague Aparna A. Labroo from the University of Chicago are investigating.

In a new study titled, "Half the Thrill Is in the Chase: Twisted Inferences from Embodied Cognitions," to be published in full June 2010 in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, Labroo and Nielsen shed insight on why people decide whether to approach or avoid a consumer product.

Nielsen and Labroo focused on the physical and psychological relationship between avoidance and approachability, a pivotal theory among marketing scholars that had not yet been tested in research trials.

"The inherent assumption in marketing is that people are motivated to approach things they like. My colleague and I began thinking that people must have learned that association - if they approach something, they infer that they like it," Nielsen said. "So we wondered if we could flip that association and see if people could be influenced to change their attitude about something."

The authors note that [psychologists](#) often attempt to cure phobic patients

by asking them to mentally simulate approaching the objects they fear. Across three studies the authors demonstrated that it is possible to use this approach to reduce aversion to certain items.

Approaching pleasure and avoiding pain are fundamental human behaviors, but the authors argue that people also subconsciously reverse this relationship. "We tend to infer that something is good based on the bodily sensation of approaching it or bad based on the sensation of avoiding it," the authors said.

Their study suggests that humans can trick themselves into more favorable evaluations of certain products and behaviors.

"Our natural inclination is to avoid - or try to avoid - anything immediately aversive even though it may be beneficial for us in the long term," Labroo and Nielsen wrote. "But to what extent might our natural avoidance of such activities and outcomes be reinforcing our dislike of things that are good for us but difficult to stomach?"

Their research product certainly fit the category of difficulty to stomach - grasshoppers and curry - a universally disliked product of their study cohort.

The analysis of the results of their first study surprised the duo.

The researchers offered respondents a can of curried grasshopper. One group of people was asked to simply evaluate it. A second group was asked to mentally simulate physical avoidance of the product and a third set was asked to simulate physical approach toward the can.

"What was surprising was that merely simulating physical approach resulted in a more favorable evaluation of the product," the authors write.

"One way for us to overcome aversions is to trick our minds," the authors wrote. "These results suggest our aversions are derived in part from our bodily sensations, and the influence of these sensations may be more far reaching than one might have presumed."

"We found that you can essentially convince yourself that something is more attractive or less aversive by making yourself approach it or at least have the feeling of approaching it. It is gaining prevalence that the body informs the mind - that we use what happens to our body to help our cognition or using your body to help inform the decision," Nielsen said.

The students in Nielsen's marketing research class were stunned to find themselves succumbing to the findings. Nielsen said his students didn't think the physical component of the study would change their evaluation of the product.

As a marketing researcher Nielsen brings research into his classroom. Students learn how to test a hypothesis, set up an experiment and to look at what components they need to control in the research experiment. His goal is to instill the love of learning and seeking answers to important questions.

"In research, we work on one piece of the puzzle. When combined with the research of others, we can better understand why consumers make the decisions that we make," Nielsen said.

Source: University of Arizona

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