

I like it, but I don't know why: How does conditioning affect consumer choice?

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Even when they are exposed to conflicting information about products, consumers are greatly affected by images attached to brands, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"On any given day a consumer is repeatedly exposed to brands that are paired with various images in one form or another—from logos on the sides of buildings to televised commercials," write authors Melanie Dempsey (Ryerson University) and Andrew A. Mitchell (University of Toronto). "Although the consumer may not be able to recall brand claims or even the brand name itself, the consumer might have been left with a positive feeling, one which he or she may not even be consciously aware."

The authors set out to determine what would happen when consumers were conditioned to like or dislike brands and then exposed to conflicting product information. To create this effect, they used an evaluative conditioning task, where hundreds of images of several hypothetical brands, pictures, and words were randomly presented, individually and in pairs, on a computer screen. During the task, one target brand was paired with 20 negative images and words and the other target brand was paired with 20 positive images and words. "The participants were unable to recognize that a particular brand had been paired with either negative or positive images. Therefore, we were able to create an 'I like it, but I don't know why' effect," the authors write.

In a follow-up experiment, the researchers presented participants with

product attribute information that contradicted their earlier impressions about pens. "We found that they selected the pen with the inferior attributes that was positively conditioned even though the product attribute information was available in memory," the authors explain.

Further experiments found that even "highly motivated" participants were unable to overcome the conditioning. "Choice decisions of [consumers](#) are not only determined by evaluations of rational information (product attributes) but are also driven by forces that are generally outside of rational control," the authors conclude.

More information: Melanie Dempsey and Andrew A. Mitchell. "The Influence of Implicit Attitudes on Consumer Choice when Confronted with Conflicting Product Attribute Information" *Journal of Consumer Research*: December 2010.

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