

That's where it's at: implicit effects of advertising

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A fundamentally new way of measuring effects of branding and advertising for presentation at *The battle of research methods*. The research we present will be of interest to all those who agree that advertising should reach consumers' hearts rather than their minds – yet hardly ever find that fact reflected in current research methods.

The assessment method we present departs significantly from traditional approaches. Instead of requesting participants to artificially grade their evaluation of objects (ads, brands, logos etc.) on multi-point scales, we ask them to merely make binary judgements – but measure their response times in doing so. Setting specific response deadlines eliminates any sort of rationalisation and bias. What is left is the 'true' attitude towards objects to which consumers often do not even have conscious access. This implicit assessment technique (IAT) marks an important step away from previous attempts to assess "unconscious" effects of advertising. Unlike depth interviews or projective measures, implicit assessment IAT can be administered on the web as well as in the studio and can be fully standardised.

There are several benefits of IAT. Firstly, if it is integrated into studies of advertising and branding effects, discrepancies between cognitive and affective effects can be analysed. This will help reveal the *real impact* of ad media and allow for efficient optimisation of adverts. Secondly, because of its extreme sensitivity, IAT will uncover effects that will go undetected with traditional methods. Thirdly, IAT requires less participants than other methods, thus enabling researchers to use more complex study designs with less effort. Fourthly, IAT takes less than ten minutes and participants report less mental fatigue than from traditional tests. This will reduce participant drop-out. Finally, because IAT does not require verbal stimuli – pictorial stimuli are just as fine – it holds considerable potential for international studies by minimising translation costs and maximising comparability of results.

Our presentation will comprise of two main sections. In the first section we will briefly outline the theoretical underpinnings of implicit assessment techniques. Our focus will be on the activation-dilution model that conceptualises customers' information processing as a two-stage process. On the *activation stage*, seeing an ad – be it a TV commercial, an on-line banner or a poster – brings up numerous bits of information about the product, the brand, and the manufacturer. Beyond purely factual information, all those things “between the lines” are activated that consumers cannot really put into words. The “raw” output of the activation stage is transformed on the subsequent *dilution stage* along the lines of social desirability including self- and other-serving biases. Much of the dilution is automated so consumers are not even aware of it and even the most careful control techniques cannot rule out its effects. As a consequence, the ad and branding effects researchers are looking for will always be ‘watered down’ by traditional approaches relying on simple questioning techniques. We will substantiate this theoretical section by a live demonstration of implicit assessment.

In the second section of our presentation we will demonstrate the potential of implicit assessment by presenting data from a study we conducted in collaboration with the University of Bristol. The questions addressed were whether IAT would reveal differences in ad effects that go undetected with a traditional measure. Furthermore, the experiment dealt with the question if ad banners do more than just activate pre-existing images. To reveal the banners' potential of *creating* brand images a between-subjects design was used. Modelled on a portfolio recall test, both in the experimental and the control group, 30 participants saw 10 ad banners in an ad presentation phase. Banners displayed fictitious brand names and slogans and all related to clothing brands. Slogans were intended to support one of five brand images (youthful, posh, conservative, trend-setting and sporty). Banners used in the control group were identical to those in the experimental group with the exception that certain banners were defined as critical and not displayed, but were replaced by a different banner. Among the tests used to assess banner impact were semantic ratings and an implicit test. In the semantic ratings, five banners representing each of the brand images had to be rated on a five-point scale for each of ten attributes (e.g. likeable, trendy, good value for money). In the implicit test, two banners were presented simultaneously, and the attributes from the semantic ratings had to be classified as describing either of the banners. One of the banners was a critical banner that had not been shown to control group participants. The key findings: critical banners were rated just as likeable as the other banners. In the IAT, however, there was a marked difference between critical and standard banners. It is also worth noting that participants rated banners in the neutral region of the five-point scale, but expressed clear preferences in the IAT. Moreover, the IAT

revealed that older participants (27 years and older) liked the “posh” and “good value for money” banners more than younger participants (24 and younger) – a difference that went undetected in the ratings. In sum, it appears that consumers may have unspeakable feelings that “vanish” as soon as they must be gauged and verbalised. Implicit assessment circumvents this problem by requiring simple dichotomous responses accessing consumers’ unfiltered affect.