The behavioural and emotional effects of unconscious brand exposure on fashion preference

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ABSTRACT

Can subliminal brands affect preference? Here we show that subliminally presented fashion brands affect rating of fashion items. Pre-sampled brand preference scores predicted the direction and strength of fashion preference. Pupillometry data show that emotional reactions are higher for preferred brands, thus hinting at a mechanism underlying the behavioural effect.

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While researchers have studied brand effects on consumer choices for decades and have established that even fictitious link with products having brands can induce their preference, we do not yet have a clear understanding of whether brands can imbue value into products when they are not seen consciously. Priming experiments has long demonstrated that unconscious information can alter thought and action, and research on decision-making has shown that implicit emotions can still affect choice. However, little is known about whether brands can affect preference and choice when processed unconsciously, and what is the mechanism involved in processing the unconscious branded product information.

We set out to test 1) the bias of unconscious brands on clothing preference, and 2) the emotional reactions manifested while visually processing the branded product information. To this end, we conducted an eye-tracking experiment on 30 women (age 25.1±2.9 years). Participants first rated the liking of individual fashion brands on a Visual Analogue Scale (VAS). During the experiment they saw a brand presented under the limen of conscious detection (32 milliseconds), using a forward and backward masking. Participants then rated the fashion clothing presented with two random objects on the open-scale self-paced VAS in total rating 24 items. The coupling between brands and outfits were randomised and counterbalanced for each subject. For each trial, we sampled individual brand liking, pupil dilation, and reported fashion-clothing preference (VAS). Additionally, we tested an independent sample of 46 women on their fashion item preference, by online survey, to provide a “benchmark” preference for the fashion items that was unrelated to branding effects.
Data were analysed by random effects GLM analysis, with fashion preference as the dependent variable, brand preference rating as the independent variable, and with independent rating of fashion items as a covariate. Analysis showed that preference for unconscious brands was significantly related to fashion-clothing rating (F=23.86, p<0.0001). Indeed, individual brand preference, when corrected by confounding variable of independent rating was positively related to fashion item ratings (F=4.25, p=0.0007).

Furthermore, statistically significant relationship between pupil dilation and fashion preference was found, both, while looking at the unconscious brand primes (t=17.00, p<0.0001), and when rating the outfits (t=41.83, p=0.0000).

To study the effect of brand preference on arousal, we ran a polynomial regression model analysis. Pupil dilation and brand preference showed a significant non-linear relationship, where strong pupil response was high for both positive and negative brand preference, both during the subliminal prime, and even stronger during the outfits’ evaluation.
Furthermore, pupil dilation and outfit preference demonstrated a significant non-linear relationship ($t=17.89$, $p<0.0001$). Here, pupil dilation was high for both the lowest and highest outfit preference when seeing the subliminal brand. This effect was even stronger during the time that the fashion outfits were judged (see figure).

Taken together, we find that brands can imbue value on product preference, even when the brand is not seen consciously. Our results give novel insight into the nature of brand equity on choice, and its underlying mechanism, and they provide a tentative link between unconsciously induced emotional arousal and overtly stated product preference. Importantly, by using eye-tracking to assess pupil dilation, we find a bivalent response pattern, where higher or lower individual preference was associated with stronger pupil dilation responses, compared to brands with an average brand preference.