

Psychology as it relates to marketing, advertising, and social media:

**How does psychology play a factor in what businesses, products, and media platforms we
are attracted to?**

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Abstract

This research analyzes findings on consumer–company identification and why we tend to like certain brands over others. Overall, the findings seemed to all connect back to one main idea; the self. Companies strive to create brands that are relatable and exemplify similar values to those of their customers. This is shown through an experiment that examines brain activations in order to generate a “more fundamental conceptualization of underlying processes by providing confirmatory evidence about the existence of psychological phenomena” (Reimann, 2011). The results of this experiment demonstrate that when individuals have a close relationship to certain brands, they are more likely to gain self-awareness and form loyalty to that brand.

Introduction

When deciding what companies or brands we want to purchase products from, we often feel more inclined to choose some over others. Sometimes this is simply because of their design, color choices, or current trends. However, it is more oftentimes caused by our brains and the way that they comprehend personalized content. Though we may not realize it, every advertisement, campaign, or social media post that we have seen in the past, leads us to make that decision and become loyal to specific companies. Through research, we are able to understand how psychology plays a factor in what businesses, products, and media platforms we are attracted to based on memory, persuasion, and company identity.

Memory and Brand Intimacy

Through multiple studies by numerous researchers, we are able to understand different self theories and their effect on how we connect to and are drawn to specific brands. Studies done by Feng et al (2019), take a look at the self-reference effect and how it has an impact on memory and intimacy. The self-reference model suggests that “human beings have a motivation

to include other people, including their resources, concept, and identity, into the self-concept in an effort to increase their own self-efficacy” (Feng, 2019). This means that “the higher the degree of intimacy, the higher the degree of self-inclusion, which leads to a better memory effect” (Feng, 2019). When looking at this in relation to companies, it is easily comparable in the idea that we, as human beings, strive to connect our own beliefs and values into the brands that we see and want to purchase from.

Persuasion and Attractiveness

Furthermore, “models of persuasion such as the heuristic-systematic model (Eagly & Chaiken, 1984, 1993) have implications with regard to how individuals perceive characteristics of the actual environment” (Ehrhart, 2005). The article, “Why Are Individuals Attracted to Organizations?” discusses the differences between systematic processing and heuristic processing, explaining that systematic processing is comprehensive and analytic, whereas heuristic processing involves less cognitive effort. Ehrhart (2005) suggests that “the type of cognitive processing that an individual implements, depends on characteristics of the message being processed.” This can then be connected back to the self-reference theory as the type of cognitive processing may depend on whether or not the individual can make personal and valuable connections to the message. This article then goes on to discuss image theory, proposing the ideas that individuals make decisions by “considering how [certain] alternatives fit their image of what is desired (Stevens, 1998). This is important in brand persuasion because companies must be aware of what that “desired” image is and how their product can help achieve it, so that consumers are inclined to select their product over others.

Company Identity and Loyalty

When it comes to customer loyalty, there are multiple aspects in which brands will try to keep consistent customers. This comes back to self connections and more specifically, brand personality in relation to the theory of social identification. In the article, “A Framework for Understanding Consumers’ Relationships with Companies,” authors, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) discuss the reasons for why customers create such a strong relationship with certain companies and their products. They say that “strong consumer–company relationships often result from consumers’ identification with those companies,” because it helps them satisfy “important self-definitional needs.” Japanese researcher, Kim Chung (2001), also states that “the more consumers identify with the brand, the more there will be word-of-mouth reports and brand loyalty.” This is shown in the following experiment discussed in the article “How we relate to brands: Psychological and neurophysiological insights into consumer–brand relationships” demonstrating positive association with established close brand relationships.

Materials and Methods

In this experiment, researchers analyzed insula activity as a means to determine whether or not there was an established close brand relationship associated with increased insula activation (Reimann, 2011). The insula is “a cortical region [in the brain] linked with salience detection, self-awareness, interoception, pain processing, and addiction” (Papoiu, 2016). By analyzing the changes in insula activity, researchers are able to show how brands forming close relationships with their customers can increase their self-awareness and loyalty to the brand.

In order to conduct this experiment, the sixteen volunteer participants were first asked to name four brands with which they had held a close relationship with for a long time, and four brands with which they had no relationship with (i.e., a brand they felt completely neutral about). They were then taken to a brain imaging facility where their brains could be scanned while

completing simple choice or rejection questions. A collection of 128 “close relationship” brands and 128 “neutral relationship” brands were displayed on a screen in front of the participants where they could then decide to “choose” or “reject” the brand.

Results

As a result of this experiment, the conductors found results using a “random-effects general linear model at the whole-brain level” (Reimann, 2011) to analyze chemical changes in the insula. The insula is the area of the brain also responsible for urging, addiction, loss aversion, and interpersonal love (Reimann, 2011), in addition to self-awareness. This section of the brain was specifically studied in order to make connections with how brands affect those functions. Results showed “significant activation increases in both the right and left insula” (Reimann, 2011) of participants' while they were anticipating choices of brands with which they had close relationships. This was measured in comparison to when they were anticipating choices of brands with which they held neutral relationships. Not only did the insula show an increase in activity, but the whole-brain analysis also revealed increased activation in other areas of the brain as well. Specifically, increased activation was found in the caudate, the parietal lobe, and the occipital lobe. “The caudate... has been associated with the anticipation of reward” (Knutson & Greer, 2008; Reimann et al., 2010), while the parietal lobe has been “implicated in cognitive processing, including calculation (Hedgcock & Rao, 2009), and the occipital lobe plays a critical role in human visual processing” (Reimann, 2011).

With this information, it can be concluded that our brain chemistry is clearly affected by close relationships and how we make decisions based upon them. When looking at brands specifically, we are more likely to purchase from ones that we have already formed connections with. This is why brands create a goal “not just to sell products and services, but also to persuade

consumers to act or think in a particular way” (Kenechukwu, 2013). Companies want their consumers to create a close and personal connection with them, so that anytime you see their marketing or advertisements, you will already have a positive connotation towards them in your mind.

Discussion

Through this neuroimaging experiment, we are able to make a conclusion on how society is affected by close brand relationships based off of the evidence that displays the insula’s significant role in the anticipation of choices of brands. Prior research has found that “the insula is active in the integration of bodily information into emotional and motivational functions” (Mesulam & Mufson, 1982). This implies that with an increased activation of the insula, there is also an increase in emotion when choosing between certain brands. This proves that when sustaining a close relationship with a brand, we are more likely to choose them again and again in the future. Further research has also shown that “close consumer–brand relationships are based on two psychological mechanisms—rapid self-expansion and inclusion into the self” (Reimann, 2011). This connects back to the idea that every decision we make based upon brands has to do with ourselves; including memory, and loyalty. The longer we have a close-relationship with a brand, the more likely we are to continue supporting that brand and sharing it to others.

With the evidence found in brain analysis and the vast amount of research, we are better able to understand how physiology plays a role in consumer-brand relationships and why we are attracted to some brands more than others. Once we find a brand attractive, or feel that they have connected with us on a personal level, we are more likely to feel inclined to support that brand as we relate to it and want to contribute to their success. This oftentimes goes unnoticed and is just a part of our unconscious decision making process that selects brands that remind us of ourselves.

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