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Music as an Unconditioned Stimulus: Positive and Negative Effects of Country Music on Implicit Attitudes, Explicit Attitudes, and Brand Choice

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Music has been shown to have an array of effects on human behavior, including mood, choice behavior and purchasing behavior (Redker & Gibson, 2009). Music can alter a consumer’s mood, which in turn alters their behavior when purchasing novel items. Although this is true, past research has not shown any long-term change in the consumer’s attitudes toward the product as an effect of music. In other words, when the consumer’s altered mood returns to its original state, the effects the music originally had on the consumer are lost (Redker & Gibson, 2009). Christopher M. Redker and Bryan Gibson (2009), conducted a study to examine whether implicit attitudes altered through the conditioning of country music would contribute to the prediction of brand choice. The researchers were interested in finding if this music might lead to a longer lasting change in brand attitudes (Redker & Gibson, 2009). It is now understood that both implicit and explicit attitudes play a role in the behavior of consumers. Until recently, in studies examining conditioned views towards consumer products, customers rated their attitudes explicitly by Likert-type scale, or by personal choice (Chaiken & Trope, 1999; as cited in Redker & Gibson, 2009). According to Redker and Gibson (2009), it is very important that consumer researchers “develop an understanding of how implicit brand attitudes might contribute to our understanding of consumer thought and behavior” (p. 2691). Since initial research has supported that both explicit and implicit attitudes can predict behavior, Redker and Gibson (2009) hypothesized that “both implicit and explicit attitudes will be conditioned and will be significantly related” (p. 2692) and “explicit attitudes will predict brand choice; however, prediction of brand choice will improve significantly when implicit attitudes are also considered” (p. 2692).

Researchers performed the study on 68 undergraduate psychology students. A pilot study was done in order to select a piece of country music for the main study. In order to choose this music a group of 30 participants in an introductory psychology class evaluated five different 30-s pieces of country music (Redker & Gibson, 2009). None of those participating in the pilot participated in the main study. The participants responded on 7-point Likert-type scales to three statements in regard to country music. These include, “I listen to country music”, “I like country music”, “I have heard this piece of music” how familiar it was to them, among other statements (Redker & Gibson, 2009). This led to the selection of a 30-s instrumental portion of a country song. It was ranked highly by those who listen to country music more than most music and those who listen to country music a great deal, it was ranked low by those who do not like nor listen to country music much and it was low in familiarity overall and to those who prefer country music (Redker & Gibson, 2009). The researchers chose to select brands that were unfamiliar to the participants as well. “Conditioning of evaluative judgments works best for novel attitudes, as compared to well known objects” (Cacioppo, Marshall-Goodell, Tassinary, & Petty, 1992; Shimp et al., 1991; as cited in Redker & Gibson, 2009). The brands selected were two kinds of root beer called Sparky’s and Fitz’s which were purchased online on a rare soda brand website, not sold in the local market and were likely to be unfamiliar to the participants (Redker & Gibson, 2009). The main study was a 2 (Music Preference) x 2 (Brand Viewed) factorial design. The brand viewed was manipulated and it was a between-subjects design (Redker & Gibson, 2009). Pretests were distrusted to various participants in psychology courses with questions including country music among other things on a scale from 3 to 21, the higher the more likeable. Participants were chosen for the dislike country group with a preference of 6 or under. The like country group consisted of a score of 18 and higher (Redker & Gibson, 2009). Participants watched commercials with many products, including the two root beer brands. They were randomly assigned to see a commercial for either brand. While the text and root beer image was presented on screen, the country music clip was playing in the background and only during the root beer commercial. Participants completed ratings of all of the products seen on Likert-type scales and then completed an implicit measure of their brand attitudes using an Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwalk et al., 2002; as cited in Redker & Gibson, 2009). This was designed to measure preferences for the two root beer brands. It featured the root beer brand they saw, and the root beer brand they did not see. Participants were then given to option of choosing which root beer brand they wanted to take home with them. They made their selection by pressing the “i” or “e” key on the keyboard.

It was found that the explicit measure had good reliability and that those who liked the music more rated the brand more favorably than those who did not like the music. The implicit measure was conducted and it was found that there was so significant main effect for the brand viewed, and no significant interaction between music preference and brand viewed (Redker & Gibson, 2009). However, those who liked country music showed an implicit preference for the brand they viewed, while those who did not like country music showed and implicit preference for the opposite brand. There was also a significant relationship between the explicit measure and the brand IAT (Redker & Gibson, 2009). The researchers wanted to know if the implicit measure significantly improved the prediction of brand choice beyond that provided by the explicit measure, and the results were that prediction of brand choice improved with the addition of the implicit measure (Redker & Gibson, 2009).

I thought this study was an interesting way to measure implicit attitudes and prediction of brand choice. They proved their hypotheses correct, and that is what is most important. The researchers believe they could alter their study by seeing what other stimuli than music can affect consumer’s implicit attitudes. They also concluded that implicit and explicit attitudes may be used to make decisions under different circumstances. For example, when a person does or does not have time to reasonably think about the decision (Redker & Gibson, 2009). The study did not cover long term predictability in regards to consumer buying patterns. I think it would have been interesting to see how participants might buy in the future, and if long-lasting effects of the song were present. This could be modified by measuring implicit and explicit attitudes in the future. I might present the same participants with a chance to buy the two new products awhile later and see which one they prefer. That could potentially prove the long lasting effects the music has. However, implicit attitudes are what is being focused on and those would still need to be considered. Another thing I would change would be the pretest in which they rated country music. On a scale from 3 to 21, it is hard to prove that someone who ranks a 6 is someone who generally likes country music a lot. I might make the Likert-scale more detailed and broad.

This relates to our course in many ways. It was very important that they chose novel items for their brands. By ordering the soda online, and making sure it was not locally sold in supermarkets made it the most unfamiliar to the participants it could possibly be. Therefore, the researchers could avoid all biases. As we learned in class, novel items are better for use of conditioning than those that are familiar. This is because the participants have not been previously exposed to the stimulus. Pairing a novel root beer brand with the country song presents a new stimulus and is called latent inhibition. It is easier to condition a person to a novel stimulus than familiar one. Prior exposure could slow the conditioning process. This study successfully proved that explicit attitudes and implicit attitudes are both important when it comes to consumer choices, but implicit attitudes allow prediction of brand choice to be even higher.

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