The Meaning of Distraction: How Metacognitive Inferences from Distraction Affect Brand Evaluations

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70% of U.S. pop.

- As consumers multitask more frequently, they are increasingly likely to encounter advertisements in the background while focusing on other tasks.

- How does distraction toward background ads affect brand evaluations?
Attention and Distraction to Simultaneously Processed Stimuli

• **Background ad** = ad encountered while primarily focused on concurrent but unrelated task

• People not able to devote all processing resources to focal task when processing two stimuli (Kahneman 1973; Lynch and Srull 1982; Pashler 1994)
  • Likely to experience some attention shift from focal task to background ad
  • **Distraction** = shift in attention away from focal task toward secondary stimulus

• **Central Hypothesis**: Consumers draw inferences based on their perceived distraction by a background ad that influence their evaluations of the brand in the ad
Consumers’ Perceived Distraction Holds Informational Value

• Consumers infer meaning from noteworthy experiences (Schwarz 2004)

• Distraction towards background ads noteworthy enough to spur inferences when:
  ▪ Perceived to be greater than expected (Schwarz 2004; Whittlesea and Williams 2000)
  ▪ Perceived to be greater than other people who encountered the same ad (Kelley 1967; Kelley and Michela 1980)

• Consumers draw on lay theories to make such inferences (Schwarz 2015)
  ▪ Lay theory/lay belief = common-sense explanations people use to understand the world (Furnham 1988)

• Underlying lay theory about distraction: distraction = interest
How Does Distraction = Interest Lay Theory Influence Brand Evaluations?

1. Consumers experience distraction by background ad noteworthy enough that they think about it/interpret it

2. Make inference that they like and are interested in the advertised brand based on the distraction = interest lay theory

Distraction toward Background Ad \[\Rightarrow\] Draw on “Distraction = Interest” Lay Theory \[\Rightarrow\] Infer Positive Brand Evaluations
Lay Theory Must Be Perceived as Diagnostic and Applicable for Consumers to Use It (Feldman and Lynch 1988; Higgins 1996)

• Diagnosticity = “appropriateness or relevance of applying stored knowledge to a stimulus” once the knowledge is activated (Higgins 1996)
  • If diagnosticity of a lay theory called into question, don’t make inferences consistent with it (Schwarz et al. 1991; Sanna and Schwarz 2003)
  • If diagnosticity of distraction = interest lay theory challenged, consumers should no longer infer more positive brand evaluations

• Applicability = degree of overlap between “attended features of a stimulus” and “stored knowledge” (Higgins 1996, 135)
  • Consumers will perceive low overlap between contents of ad and distraction = interest lay theory when advertised brand is from a product category in which they have they little interest
  • When interest in advertised product category is low, if a consumer is a distracted by a background ad, he or she will recognize that the distraction does not signal interest in the brand
    • More likely inference is now that that consumer was distracted because ad had distracting executional elements (e.g., attention-grabbing sound effects, unique narrator’s voice, etc.)
Study 1: Consumers Infer Interest When Unexpectedly Distracted

- Inferences particularly likely when:
  - Experiences differ from expectations (Schwarz 2004; Whittlesea and Williams 2000)

- Consumers often naturally more distracted than expected by background stimuli (Finley et al. 2014; Ophir et al. 2009; Sanbonmatsu et al. 2013)

Study 1 Design

- Participants colored a picture while hearing background ad
- Manipulated how distracting participants expected ad to be (three experimental conditions)
  1. Manipulated low expectations of distraction (i.e., manipulated to perceive themselves to be more distracted than expected)
  2. Natural low expectations of distraction (i.e., naturally perceived themselves to be more distracted than expected)
  3. Manipulated high expectations of distraction (i.e., manipulated to perceive themselves to be distracted less than or in line with expectations)

n = 110 undergraduates
Study 1 Results

- Both participants who were manipulated to have low expectations of distraction and those who naturally believed the ad shouldn’t be very distracting reported equally high interest in the brand because they make inferences when they find they are more distracted than expected by the background ad.

- Brand interest in these two conditions was significantly greater than the condition in which participants expected the ad to be distracting (and thus did not perceive distraction to be noteworthy).

Key Takeaway: Consumers do not expect to be distracted and infer greater brand interest when they are
Study 2: Manipulating Diagnosticity of Distraction = Interest Lay Theory

Goal of study 2: Show that distraction = interest lay theory drives inferences about brand evaluations

- **Prediction**: Consumers don’t infer greater brand interest when lay theory is not diagnostic

Study 2 Design

- Participants colored a picture while hearing background ad
- Manipulated how distracting participants expected ad to be
  1. Low expected distraction (i.e., manipulated to perceive themselves to be more distracted than expected)
  2. High expected distraction (i.e., manipulated to perceive themselves to be distracted less than or in line with expectations)
- Also manipulated diagnosticity of underlying distraction = interest lay theory
  1. High diagnosticity: Read nothing that challenged diagnosticity of distraction = interest relationship
  2. Low diagnosticity: Read that “one’s level of distraction does not signal anything about interest”
Study 2 Results

- When distraction = interest lay theory is perceived as diagnostic, participants infer greater interest when they perceive themselves to be more distracted than expected.
- When distraction = interest lay theory is not perceived as diagnostic, participants no longer infer greater interest when they perceive themselves to be more distracted than expected.

Key Takeaway: Distraction = Interest lay theory drives inferences.
Study 3: Consumers Infer Positive Brand Evaluations When More Distracted Relative to Others

• Inferences particularly likely when:
  ▪ Experiences differ from others (Kelley 1967; Kelley and Michela 1980)

Study 3 Design
• Participants colored a picture while hearing background ad
  • Ad was now between music to more accurately simulate radio listening experience
  • Manipulated how distracted by ad participants perceived themselves to be relative to others
    1. High relative distraction (i.e., manipulated to perceive themselves to be more distracted than others)
    2. Low expected distraction (i.e., manipulated to perceive themselves to be less distracted relative to others)

n = 260 undergraduates
Study 3 Results

**Brand Interest**

\[ F(1, 235) = 5.68; \quad p = .018 \]

- **High Relative Distraction**: 3.87
- **Low Relative Distraction**: 3.47

**Brand Attitudes**

\[ F(1, 235) = 3.31; \quad p = .070 \]

- **High Relative Distraction**: 0.93
- **Low Relative Distraction**: 0.56

**Key Takeaway:** Participants infer more brand interest and report more positive brand attitudes when they perceive themselves to be more distracted relative to others who encountered the same advertisement.

Effect robust to changes in:
- Brand featured in ad (low involvement good)
- More naturalistic presentation (ad embedded in music)
Study 4 Design and Results

- Similar design as study 3, except used Mercedes ad
- Also measured participants’ general interest in the cars product category

**Results:** Participants who perceive themselves to be highly distracted relative to others infer greater interest in the advertised brand (Mercedes) only when they have at least moderate interest in the cars product category in general (shaded region)

- Additional analysis revealed that consumers with low general interest in the advertised product category (non-shaded region) instead attribute their distraction to executional elements of the ad itself (instead of their own brand interest)

**Key Takeaway:** Participants only infer greater brand interest when they have at least moderate interest in the advertised product category in general
Conclusions and Implications

• Good news for marketers in fractured media environment: Background ads can shape consumer attitudes towards brands

• Consumers might infer more positive brand evaluations when relatively distracted by a background ad, but:

• Results highlight importance of targeting psychographics (Activities, Interests, and Opinions):
  • e.g., Interests: Positive effects of distracting background ads only if consumers have at least moderate interest in product category