

Priming in Advertising Studies

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The study of advertising includes a strong psychological aspect. Information processing and persuasion mechanisms are among the most popular topics in the field. Priming holds its own, rather noticeable place in exploring what makes advertising effective. The purposes of this article are: 1) to demonstrate that studies which deal with priming effects in advertising are not homogenous in their understanding of the concept of priming, and 2) to show that priming itself embraces different interpretations and needs further clarification of how it works.

In one of the pioneering studies connecting advertising and priming [1], the author asserts that ad context affects participants' information processing. The ad context activates (the verb used as a substitute for 'primes') certain attributes, but not for their own sake. Activated (or made accessible, another substitute for priming action) attributes make possible various evaluations of something else, for example, a certain product. The author also distinguishes between cognitive and affective priming. The former reflects the accessibility of attributes, and the latter captures an overall negative or positive tone of an ad. This tone accompanies a message and affects evaluations of this message. The study demonstrated that cognitive priming affects how the participants evaluate the product, and affective priming forms the participants' evaluations of the ad. This important study has many merits, but priming itself is defined vaguely. It is not referred to as a process, or a mechanism, or something else, but there were a couple of references to "priming effects" in the text.

In a more recent study, Kemps, Tiggemann, and Hollitt suggested that advertising of a product activates thoughts about it, then this activation triggers motivations to consume [2]. The authors talk about priming effects influencing and preceding accessibility and motivation, placing weight on the exposure part of this process. Two different groups in the study responded to food ads with increased activation of food-related cognitions, but only one of them, which included overweight subjects, formed noticeable intentions to eat. This study made a valuable contribution to helping understand that, in priming, cognitions may be activated in most of the cases, while motivations - only in some. However, lack of definitional description of the priming leaves room for speculating why there is such a discrepancy.

Another study on food advertising and priming [3] focused on the automatic, unconscious effects of priming, which were not a dominant theme in the first two studies. Priming is referred to as priming methods necessary to activate behaviors and intents. Findings confirmed the hypotheses on priming effects, mechanisms are even more relevant for the current discussion. At least two mechanisms were identified: perceptive mechanism, when the very activation of cognitions leads to certain evaluations and intentions and behaviors; and motivational mechanism, when certain goals and needs dominate intentions and behaviors when activated. The authors acknowledged the complexity of a priming phenomenon: "In reality, the power of advertising may be its ability to prime behaviors through multiple mechanisms at the same time." (p.411). This study depicted how priming works in detail. Like the previous contributions it did not define priming directly taking it for granted.

The above overview serves as an example of the complexity and multi-faceted nature of priming. Multiple interpretations of priming are

not characteristic only in relation to advertising. Problems and debates in this area are reflected elsewhere [4]. However, these three studies illustrate what directions further clarifications of priming may take.

First, there is an important definitional problem: is priming a process, a mechanism, an effect or all of the above? There is a general consensus about the model to which priming applies. People are exposed to certain external stimuli that activate cognitions and these cognitions trigger intentions and behaviors that are related to cognitions. It's safe to say that activation is a process and the intentions and behaviors are the effects, but beyond that a mechanism becomes murkier.

Second, a set of stimuli may be numerous so they may activate different cognitions. And the artificial limitations imposed by experimental designs may limit generalization of findings. Even within an experiment, as we have seen, there is a potential for a conflict between different motivations. There is a possibility that motivations are not only triggered by cognitions, but may precede them. In the Kemp, Tiggemann and Hollitt [2] study, the first group didn't eat more even though their cognitions were activated by food ads because they followed a non-motivational trait path [5], meaning people adjust their ongoing behavior to the environmental pressures of experimentation. The second, overweight group could follow their goal path when dominant needs and goals can either enhance or weaken priming effects. In other words, this group could increase eating after any television program.

Third, the notion that priming equals accessibility is contested [4,6]. Alternative explanations of priming argue that priming may happen when people build their mental models of situations defined by external stimuli as well as when individuals are guided by the perceived importance of the messages they process.

The above discussion demonstrates the value of priming for research on advertising, but it also argues that priming mechanisms need further clarification and development.

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