

How does childhood brand exposure influence buying behaviour and brand recognition in adulthood?

Peilin Phua

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Supervisors:

Assoc. Prof. Rachel Kennedy

Dr. Bill Page

Dr. Giang Trinh

Dr. Nicole Hartnett

Ehrenberg-Bass Institute for Marketing Science
University of South Australia

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Ehrenberg-Bass
Institute for Marketing Science

Abstract

"The past is never dead. It's not even past." – William Faulkner, Requiem for a Nun.

People tend to repeat past behaviour, forming habits (Wood and Neal, 2009). Some habits become ingrained over time as the associations between the sequence of behaviours are consistently reinforced (du Plessis, 2005). Given the high frequency of brand consumption and purchase in our daily lives, consumer behaviour is repetitive (Wood and Neal, 2009). Consumer behaviour is predictable: people tend to choose the same brands across different shopping trips (Seetharaman, 2004), buy predictably from a range of brands (Ehrenberg et al., 1990), buy similar quantities from a given retailer over different visits (Vogel et al., 2008), and consume similar types of foods across days (van't Riet et al., 2011). It has been suggested that older consumers, having more purchase and consumption experience, have more established habits due to the higher cumulative frequency of repetitive behaviours (as compared to younger people) (Drolet et al., 2010).

A consequence of repeated behaviours over time can be observed where older consumers are more likely to buy familiar brands (Lambert-Pandraud and Laurent, 2010b, Anderson and Sharp, 2010, Lambert-Pandraud et al., 2005). These familiar brands, or established brands, have been in the market for a long time, which allows for higher cumulative frequency of brand exposure or usage compared to newer brands. However, this topic is under-researched (Lambert-Pandraud and Laurent, 2010b). The initiation and development of consumer brand preferences is under-explored. There is a need to understand how brand preferences develop and endure over time. Such knowledge is vital to determine the influence of temporal (brand age) on consumer behaviour.

This research aims to better understand two aspects of long-term brand exposure: consumer behaviour and consumer memory of brands. Study One takes a behavioural approach which examines actual purchasing behaviour of a large panel of consumers. Study Two involves adopting a well-established theory from psychology known as 'Age of Acquisition' effects (AoA) and using it to examine brand name recognition.

Study One: buying behaviour and age

A panel data of 15,000 households with over 88,000 purchases of 68 brands of six categories were used to examine consumer choices in relation to the age of brands and the age of the buyers. Analyses included an array of metrics to evaluate buying behaviour across consumer age cohorts and brand user profiles.

Results from Study One show brand exposure in early years of life has some effect on the buying preferences of older consumers. Older consumers do not appear to principally buy long-established brands (from share of category requirement analysis), or buy them more frequently (from average purchase frequency analysis). However, older consumers were found to spend more (i.e. at least 20 percent higher than the category average) in 38 percent of the long-established brands. The findings are limited to a subset of brands and therefore not broadly generalizable to other long-established consumer packaged goods brands.

There is also little evidence to support that brands (long-established or newer) compete differently across age cohorts as we found consumers of all ages buy all brands regardless of brand age. This presents an opportunity for newer brands, with older consumers still willing to 'try' newer brands. While there is some evidence that suggest long-established brands enjoy behavioural loyalty from older consumers, such advantage will fade if these brands rely on their legacy and fail to maintain a competitive presence in the market; especially in an ever-changing landscape where newer competitors are constantly introduced.

Study Two: brand name recognition

To test the AoA effects in brand names, primary data consisting of 59,100 individual responses from 1000 respondents and 52 brands from five categories was used. Results from Study Two are in line with past AoA findings, but with small effect sizes. Early acquired brand names were recognised faster and more accurately than late acquired brands (Ellis et al., 2010). Brands that people acquired during early childhood (at age four or under) were recognised faster (by 14ms) and more accurately (by two percent) than those brands acquired later (age five and over). This supports the existing knowledge about AoA effects. Despite statistically significant differences, effect sizes were small, indicating childhood brand exposure has weak influence on brand name recognition performance. Further investigation should be taken before concluding that early acquired brands can influence consumers' brand memory.

Apart from using childhood brand exposure to evaluate brand name recognition performance, brand encounter and brand usage were included as other potential explanatory variables. Descriptive analyses and regression tests were used in Study Two.

Results showed that brand encounter has a large positive influence on recognition accuracy ($V=.71$). Frequent brand encounters increase recognition accuracy of brand names. That said brands that were encountered more than a year ago still scored high on recognition accuracy on average (84 percent). This suggests that brand exposure (brands seen over a year ago) potentially has long-term influence on recognition accuracy (brand is not forgotten entirely) as some memories linger.

Brand usage (users vs. non-users) also had a large positive influence on recognition accuracy ($V=.44$). Users were 1.6 times more likely to accurately identify brand name compared to non-users. The more recently a brand was used, the higher the recognition accuracy. Variation of recognition accuracy among users did not differ much based on their last usage ($V=.06$), which suggests that usage recency has a

small effect on recognition accuracy. The effect sizes of brand encounter and brand usage were small on recognition reaction time ($\eta^2 < .1$).

It is recommended that marketers improve the reach of brands (i.e. have more people see/encounter the brand at least once) because brand encounters can have a lasting effect (more than a year) on consumers' memory. As brand memories seem to linger, it may be worth re-promoting brands that have ceased advertising for some time since these valuable brand memories may still linger in consumers' minds. Furthermore, it is recommended to maintain consistency in their branding. Changes in branding may require consumers to relearn and this takes time and effort (repeated brand exposure or usage) for brand associations to develop and strengthen in consumers' memories. Early brand exposures do not guarantee superior memory performance. Hence, it is crucial for brands to strive for frequent exposure, so that memory links of the brand are refreshed consistently, since memory rehearsal improves fluency of brand recognition (Goldstein, 2015).