

Affective and evaluative priming tests

There are other implicit-reaction research paradigms such as affective or evaluative priming tests (the two terms refer to the same basic testing paradigm).⁹ In these tests the participants are sorting target words or images (such as brand names or product examples) into one of two categories (rather than the four of the IAT) such as brand A or B.

An example of an affective priming test would be where images (such as logos or bottles) or words (such as brand names) representing wine brand A or B flash up on the screen and the participant has to categorize them according to which brand they are. However, before each brand word or image appears it is briefly preceded by a word that might be an adjective such as 'premium', 'trendy', 'passionate' or 'irritating'. The variations in how long it takes people to categorize the brand are influenced by the degree of connection between the brand and the prime word that preceded it. For example, a lover of brand A might be faster to categorize a logo as belonging to this brand when it is preceded by the word 'delicious' rather than the word 'disgusting'.

In another variant of this test the participant is sorting between words that are unambiguously good or bad (or two extremes of a positive versus negative construct such as 'high quality versus low quality'),¹⁰ and is being primed by words that they will likely have a positive or negative affinity for, such as brand names that they likely associate as being good/bad or high quality/low quality – ie there are some test designs where the brands or products are the primes, and some where they are the targets.

One advantage of affective priming tests is that they are easier to design so that you can evaluate brands separately (rather than in a purely joint comparison test).¹¹ One of the differences between the IAT and affective priming techniques is that IATs seem to be better suited to measuring categories, whilst affective priming is better at measuring particular examples of categories.

Some market research priming tests include exposure to a stimulus, which could be a still image or a short video (such as a TV ad) sandwiched in-between two identical tests. This is called an intervention stimulus, and is used to see if it shifts the automatic associations measured in the pre-test to the post-test. For example, participants might complete an affective priming test to measure their associations with two wine

brands, then they view a TV ad for one of the brands, then complete the same priming test again. The average reaction times for the same prime-target pairs can be compared across the first (pre) and second (post) tests to see what differences there are. Any significant differences are then taken to have been caused by the ad that the participants watched in-between.

Their use for marketers

Market researchers are increasingly using these types of tests, either one of the standard academically tested paradigms, or a more bespoke one. You can either commission a specialist agency to run a test, or code one yourself. If the latter, there are platforms such as MediaLab, Micro-Experimental Laboratory (MEL), PsyScope, or Inquisit in which tests can be created, or they can be directly coded in languages such as Java, PHP, Flash etc.

These measures can be useful to marketers in mapping out which areas they should push into, and which to stay clear of, which words to use, and which to avoid. Similar to the concept of 'paving the cowpath' in Chapter 4, they can show us which combinations of ideas feel most natural to consumers.

Implicit measures may be particularly useful for studying 'vice' consumer behaviours: eg those relating to tempting (but unhealthy) foods, smoking or alcohol. In these areas there is often strong pressure to either deceive oneself, or to appear virtuous when questioned, either for reasons of vanity or social desirability.

One study, for example, examined attitudes in Poland towards Polish versus foreign brands across a number of product categories. Whilst explicit questioning showed that the Polish consumers preferred the US brands, the implicit questioning showed a more favourable rating for the Polish ones.¹²

This example of what psychologists call 'in-group bias' (favouring a group of which you are a member) maybe affects consumers' implicit attitudes not just to the country of origin of a brand, but of spokespeople, or of whether they are associating a brand with themselves or not. Consumers may be unaware of these biases, or just embarrassed to admit to them when questioned!

Brand-mapping

Implicit tests are ideal for brand-mapping and positioning research. Brand planners tend to work with words; their brand is defined by a collection of words, so implicit techniques quantify the exact thing that they already work with. Regular implicit testing can be a good way to track the brand's evolution over time, and to make sure that it is still projecting the right things to consumers. Another use of brand-mapping is to understand the territories of meaning that your brand occupies relative to its competitors. This can reveal areas of uniqueness or differentiation, as well as how well you are evoking qualities that your competitor is also evoking (you can test your competitor's brand as well). Another area of brand-mapping that implicit testing can be used for is to gauge the degree of association between your brand and potential new areas of brand extension. For example, if your brand is a supermarket, how closely is it connected to other service categories such as banking or insurance? A close connection could point to an easier potential for a brand to move into that business than a weaker connection. If an established brand can extend into new products then those products have the advantage of the instant recognition and familiarity that come with the brand, and are effective in system 1 success.

Testing whether an ad fulfils its aims

Another of the most frequent uses of implicit testing is in ad testing. Other techniques often focus on the moment-by-moment effect of an ad on emotions, memory and attention, whereas the focus of implicit response measures is on measuring whether and to what degree an ad evokes the specific concepts and emotions that it was intended to. One downside to this type of testing is that it tends to give overall scores for the ad, without the moment-by-moment diagnostics. If a particular concept fails or succeeds to be communicated by the ad, the test will not tell you which sections need to be changed, or which were responsible. Nevertheless, it is often relatively easy to infer this. The real power of using implicit measures for ad testing may be for testing several competing versions of an ad against each other to see which best communicates the desired attributes.

Media-mapping

A more complex, yet in-demand, question that implicit testing can address is the potential for different media to communicate different emotions and concepts. In other words, if you take the same campaign, and the same range of attribute words, which medium (eg TV, radio, print) is better at evoking each attribute? Whilst this is possible, in practice it means a comparatively large (and hence more costly) test. If your question is just relating to one campaign (eg given campaign A, how does it perform across each medium?) then the test may be relatively normal in size. However, if you are trying to answer the larger question of how different media perform in general, across multiple campaigns, then you will need to test a lot more material as well as use more sophisticated testing designs.

Price-testing

Implicit tests can be used to measure the degree of association between a product and a price. Rather than attribute words, price figures are shown. This is effectively showing which price(s) feels most natural in consumers' minds.

Some watch-outs

When building or commissioning implicit tests, here are a few things to consider:

- A true implicit test does not allow for deliberation, however quick. Instead, participants are focused on completing a task, as opposed to proffering a quick opinion. It is almost impossible for people to consciously, systematically control their implicit responses. They cannot wilfully second-guess, self-censor or edit their responses in the way they can with typical articulated research. Simply asking people to categorize something quickly may be better than articulated research, but it is not a true implicit test.
- Nevertheless, it is likely that there is no sharp demarcation between how implicit and explicit memories and attitudes affect us in the real world. It is likely that they form a continuum.
- Bear in mind that whilst these measures offer apparent precision that does not necessarily mean they can precisely distinguish very

closely matched words. Whilst marketing teams might agonize and debate over the finest shades of difference between words to describe their brand, it does not mean that such tight demarcations of meaning exist in the consumers' minds, and there may sometimes be a high degree of variation between consumers on this.

- Also, just because you theorize that a particular word is important to driving sales, and you then find that your brand strongly implicitly activates that word, it does not follow that you will definitely have strong sales. You need to first establish what words/concepts are genuinely driving your consumers.
- Negativity-bias is the tendency for negative words to be recognized faster than positive ones. Usually it's best not to mix in one negative word when all the others are positive.

Implicit testing terms

Prime: this is the word or image that you are using to activate the participants' response to the target.

Target: the words or images that the participant is being asked to categorize or respond to.

The intervention stimulus: some formats of implicit testing prime participants with exposure to an image, video or sound clip sandwiched in-between two tests in order to see the pre- versus post-difference (from which you can then infer the effect of the stimulus on the priming scores).

Trial: one instance of the test in which participants must press a key to make a choice.

Block: a series of trials.

Effect size: the statistical measure of the strength of connection between the attribute and the brand.

Statistical power size: how likely the results are to be due to a genuine connection between the prime and the target.