

# Guest Editorial

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## Unconscious thinking, feeling and behavior toward products and brands: Introduction to a *Journal of Brand Management* special issue

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### Abstract

This introduction reviews the motivating forces behind this issue, exploring the role of nonconscious consumer behavior in branding environments. The article establishes a foundation of unconscious research in psychology and consumer behavior, and then provides an introduction to the four articles that follow. The article concludes with a call to adopt an inclusive interpretive–positivistic stance to the study of unconscious consumer–brand behavior, attitudes and beliefs.

### Keywords:

automatic; behavior; brand; consumer; experiment; interpretive

This article serves to briefly lay theoretical ground for the study of unconscious thinking regarding consumers' behavior, attitudes and beliefs (BABs) toward brands, and provides a brief introduction to the remaining four articles in this special topics issue. BAB's order is important here, as substantial evidence ([Wegner, 2002](#); [Wilson, 2002](#)) indicates that behavior can precede attitude, which in turn precedes belief toward an object. The propositions that behavior precedes consciousness and that most thinking occurs unconsciously frequently cause shock, disbelief and anger. Ironically, humans automatically prefer to believe that conscious will drives their beliefs, attitudes and behavior.

Socrates and Freud are prominent thinkers whose views relating to unconsciousness were highly controversial among their contemporaries. Infamously, Socrates questions on the topic and related topics lead to his trial and execution. It is said that Socrates once visited the oracle of Delphi, where he was told the most important task in his life was to know his real self. To know the real self is perhaps the ultimate goal of philosophy ... He was never satisfied with accepting outer appearances and conventional wisdom, but always strove for a deeper understanding of his real self. Above all, Socrates taught us not accept our existing thoughts as true. Step back and reevaluate the truth and veracity of your opinions and beliefs. Seek to know your real self and seek truth. It is a lofty philosophy, but one that has retained an enduring appeal and fascination through the ages. ([Pettinger, 2011](#))

Socrates realized that the Oracle was correct, in that although so-called wise men thought themselves wise and yet were not, he himself knew he was not wise at all, which, paradoxically, made him the wiser one as he was the only person aware of his own ignorance.

[Wilson \(2009, p. 384\)](#) conjectures, 'One might think that "Know thyself" would be a central theme in psychological science. Certainly, the average person on the street thinks of it as the *sine qua non* topic of psychology. A desire to figure themselves out is what draws many college students to our introductory-level courses. They are quickly disabused of this notion; few intro courses spend much time on the topic (neither 'self-knowledge' nor 'self-insight' are major topics in intro psych texts)'.

[Wilson \(2009\)](#) points out that psychoanalysis is the grandparent of theories on knowing thyself, providing a comprehensive explanation of how threatening information is repressed from consciousness. Since then, numerous dual process theories posit the existence of separate information processing systems, one much more available to consciousness than the other (for example, [Nisbett and Wilson, 1977](#); [Bargh, 1994](#); [Wegner, 2002](#); [Dijksterhuis and Nordgren, 2006](#)). These theories suggest that Freud may have been too conservative in his characterization of the unconscious. The architecture of the mind is such that a great deal of mental processing occurs outside of conscious awareness, not because thoughts and feelings are threatening to people, but because that is how the mind has evolved to work. The specific theories differ in their descriptions of the exact nature of the two systems (e.g., unconscious, automatic, slow learning, associative, implicit for one; conscious, controlled, fast learning, propositional, explicit for the other). ([Wilson, 2009, p. 386](#))

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## THREE POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND CONSCIOUSLY ABOUT UNCONSCIOUS CONSUMER–BRAND RESEARCH

Three points are worth keeping in mind consciously while reading this special topics issue. First, attempting to know oneself by studying unconscious BABs is but one reason for research on the topic. Along with research for understanding unconscious processes, research on the topic includes attempts to describe, predict and control (that is, influence) unconscious acts and thoughts. Examples of consumer–brand studies demonstrating unconscious influences on actions by consumers include [Brasel and Gips \(2011\)](#), [Ferraro \*et al\* \(2009\)](#) and [Shiv \*et al\* \(2005\)](#). Yet work exploring nonconscious pressures on branding and consumer behavior can be favorable to consumer welfare. A better understanding of the habitual and nonconscious drivers of consumer behavior can help consumers become aware of their own biases, pressures and schematic responses to marketing stimuli, and make more effective decisions than not having such knowledge.

Second, unconscious processes include multiple dimensions that are to some extent unique from one another. [Bargh \(1994\)](#) describes some of these dimensions as ‘the four horsemen of automaticity’. They include lack of awareness, lack of intent, efficiency and lack of control. ‘These elements do not always go together and most, if not all, automatic processes have only a subset of them. For instance, typing is efficient (but does not have the other elements), performance on the classic Stroop task has lack of control, and most priming effects have lack of awareness and intent’ ([Chartrand and Fitzsimons, 2001](#), p. 1). Therefore, exploring the nonconscious not as a monolithic unidimensional entity but rather as a multifaceted and complex process with aspects that can be more or less relevant to the particular research context is important.

Third, be open to multiple perspectives on the study of unconscious processes in consumer–brand research. Although [Wilson’s \(2009\)](#) suggestion for the possibility of a unified field of inquiry is spot-on, his perspective may prematurely discount psychoanalytic theory and methods: We have moved far beyond psychoanalytic theory and should put behind us any lingering Freudophobia (the fear of becoming mired in wishy-washy ideas that are impossible to test). Methodological advances have put new tools at our disposal. I think we are in a position to integrate diverse areas of research into a unified field of inquiry. ([Wilson, 2009](#), p. 384)

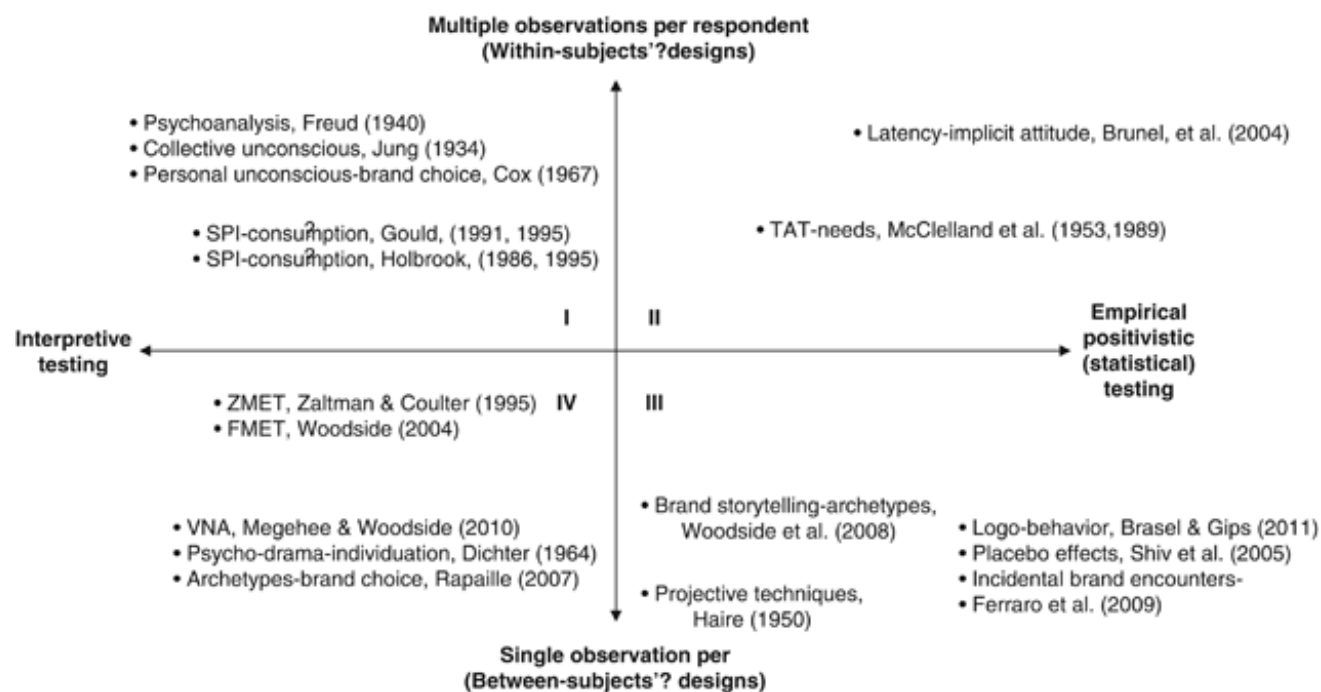
Downplaying interpretive research contributions and methods that positivistically test qualitative data (for example, [McClelland \*et al\*, 1989](#); [Boyatzis, 1998](#)) or examine unconscious consumer–brand BABs qualitatively (for example, [Cox, 1967](#); [Rapaille, 2007](#)) can obfuscate valuable theoretical perspectives and research findings. [McClelland \(1961\)](#), [McClelland \*et al\*’s \(1989\)](#) substantial contributions of testing qualitative data using empirical positivistic methods (that is, ‘building in degrees of freedom methods’, see [Campbell, 1975](#)) is suggestive of additional possibilities of co-joining interpretive and empirical positivistic data analyses. Interpretive data analysis without using empirical positivistic methods (for example, [Cox, 1967](#); [Rapaille, 2007](#)) is possible and useful; Rapaille’s list of 70 plus global clients (for example, Ford, P&G, Pepsi, Citibank, Unilever, Samsonite, Disney, Kraft) offers some support for this perspective.

[Chartrand and Fitzsimons \(2001\)](#) also highlight the benefit of exploring a broader view of consumer behavior research, especially with regard to nonconscious consumer behavior. Although researchers employing interpretative and introspective methods had been exploring the role of the nonconscious in consumption and branding activities for many years (as cited above), the traditional experimentalist paradigm had avoided public recognition of the role of the subconscious until a Choice Symposium in 2001 brought a number of experimentalist researchers together to share findings, frustrations and support. This highlights the need to not only look to each other as we continue to explore this complex and rapidly evolving area of nonconscious consumer behavior, but we must also be willing to look outside of our traditional research paradigms and embrace broader definitions of exploration into the issue.

## A BROAD USEFUL VIEW OF UNCONSCIOUS CONSUMER–BRAND RESEARCH

[Figure 1](#) provides a two-dimensional map for identifying studies relevant for unconscious consumer–brand research. The X-axis represents interpretive and positivistic data analysis on a continuum. The Y-axis represents within- and between-subjects research designs on a continuum. [Figure 1](#) includes topics and example studies for each quadrant.

[Figure 1.](#) Research methods and exemplars in testing unconscious theories.



Insightful studies into unconscious consumer–brand research are available in all four quadrants. But without examining such a grid, researchers are likely to adopt a myopic view toward relevant theory and method. Focusing only within one quadrant may also make researchers miss a wide variety of viewpoints, both in agreement and in contradiction to their current hypotheses and research methods. Especially given the cognitively involving and high-attention nature of traditional empirical experimentation and measures in the Type III quadrant, researchers exploring the role of the nonconscious in consumer behavior need to be especially open to explorations from alternative within-subject designs, and interpretive methods.

The articles in this special issue cover a broad range of research perspective and use multiple sets of lenses to illuminate the role of the consumer nonconscious in branding and consumer behavior. They range from the conceptual to the experimental and from the interpretative to the statistical. Hopefully, the variety of approaches contained within can inspire more exploration into this field of growing importance, while encouraging researchers to explore research paradigms and authors outside of their own training and research mindset.

## **AN INTRODUCTION TO THE FOUR ARTICLES**

### **The prevalence of unconscious mental processes in consumer choice: Toward a new model of consumer behavior**

Neale Martin and Kyle Morich use this article to highlight the numerous limitations of the model of consumer behavior as one of actively involved, highly motivated, consciously processing consumers, and create a model and system of consumer behavior governed by nonconscious behavior, routine, schema and habit. Bridging the academic/practitioner gap, this piece reinforces the role of context and feedback loops in consumer behavior, and encourages all of us to explore just how well developed our internal ‘consumer autopilot’ actually is.

### **Nonconscious drivers of visual attention in interactive media environments**

S. Adam Brasel explores the role of nonconscious visual attention within branded environments, summarizing work across numerous studies in vision and perception to highlight the automatic and heuristic nature of much of visual processing. The article highlights the effects of goals and interactivity on visual attention, reviewing research and implications on how the motivators of media consumption and the nature of the media channel can dramatically shape the visual field before conscious perception ever enters the picture.

### **Can unconscious–conscious processing sequences enhance ad exposure outcomes?**

In this article, Patrali Chatterjee explores how the exposure order of self-selected versus forced advertising exposure can affect processing and memory for ad content. She shows that ad formats that allow the user to select the amount of processing devoted to it (such as optional internet banner ads) induce pre-attentive processing that can boost the effect of subsequent forced ads that require deeper and more motivated processing (such as interstitial ads), but the reverse order yields little benefit. This work reinforces the effectiveness of top-of-mind

awareness-focused ad vehicles such as banner advertising, and confirms that high involvement or conscious process is not a prerequisite for effective ad exposures.

### **Exploring social motivations for brand loyalty: Conformity versus escapism**

This article, from Lauren Labrecque, Anjala Krishen and Stephan Grzeskowski explores both sides of the social aspect of branded consumption. Although consumers use brands to conform with desired groups, as well as escape and establish individual identity, the communication goals driving these two routes of social influence differ. Results of this article help explain why Apple users can feel uniformly nonconformist without drowning in a pool cognitive dissonance.

### **NEW DIRECTIONS AND A SPECIAL THANK YOU**

Collectively, the articles in this special topics issue suggest adopting an inclusive stance to the study of consumer–brand unconscious processes. [Wilson's \(2009\)](#) suggestion for building a unified theory needs to include co-joining interpretive and empirical positivistic methods and findings across many decades of research on the study of unconscious processes.

The recent advances in creative experimental designs in quadrant III centered studies (between-subjects experimental designs) are suggestive for advancing new designs that combine methods across the quadrants in [Figure 1](#). [McClelland \(1961\)](#), [McClelland and colleagues \(1953, 1989\)](#) deserve credit and our gratitude for illustrating examples of such qualitative/quantitative designs.

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