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Branding and liberal autonomy

Terlaak, E.

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4 How Branding Structurally Violates Minimal Liberal Autonomy

What I have argued so far is that branded messages that violate autonomy are ones that take the form of evaluative conditioning or unconscious influence or are adopted after the induction of negative affect. In order to establish whether these techniques are used widely I took into account structural pressures for using them that emanate from social norms, economic conditions and psychological conditions. For consumer action (at the points of purchase and consumption) the pressure was straightforward. Unconscious goal activation by means of priming was found to be sufficiently effective in the short term, so that one should find ample evidence of its effectiveness in the realm of consumption (section 1).

For mental state formation, matters turned out to be more complicated because unconscious influence and evaluative conditioning mainly affect implicit attitudes, which are not as effective in influencing behavior as explicit attitudes (all things being equal). I argued however that when the use of brand images evokes conflict, implicit brand attitudes resulting from evaluative conditioning are more effective than explicit ones (in whatever way they are acquired), and I specified the conditions under which such conflicts were expected to emerge. If these arguments are correct, one would expect to find empirical evidence for attitude change brought about by branding in ways that violate autonomy both from laboratory experiments and from the historical record of branding. More specifically, one should find in laboratory experiments that for messages that activate the affiliation, status or mating module implicit attitude change is often more effective than explicit attitude change. And one should find in the historical record that advertisements that appeal to these same modules make more use of rhetorical techniques that are known to foster evaluative conditioning (or implicit attitude formation by means of associative processing more generally).

Unfortunately, no such research exists to date, so that I will restrict myself to more limited arguments. That is, I will give evidence merely of the effectiveness of mainly evaluative conditioning in changing implicit attitudes for brands and for the effectiveness of such attitudes in triggering purchasing behavior. I also identify a set of rhetorical techniques that facilitate associative processing and specify under which conditions their application in advertising messages is evidence of autonomy violation, so that my theoretical argument can be falsified (section 2). I move on to consider the conditions that moderate the need for state intervention. In this regard I argue that the effects of autonomy violating branding are sufficiently central to warrant state action (section 3), that the requisite intentions on the part of brand managers are retrievable (section 4) and that there are no adequate opportunities for consumers to consent to unconscious influence in branding (section 5).

1 Branding, Autonomy and Consumer Action

In chapter 2 I identified three main moderators of the autonomy of actions. The authenticity of actions is moderated by cognitive load and negative affect, while the amount of self-control of actions is affected also by the unconscious triggering of behavior. For these factors to influence consumers in a relevant way (i.e. a way that enhances sales), they must have an influence either at the point of purchase or at the point of consumption. With regard to cognitive load and negative affect little is known about their effect on consumers in any of these realms.¹ Moreover, although both factors could theoretically enhance sales, it is not obvious that such tactics would work in practice. Negative affect is a dangerous tool to employ, because it is also associated with negative attitudes towards attitude objects. Cognitive load is likewise not without risk because the deployment of cognitive load by salespersons may trigger reactance in consumers. Hence, in the absence of ecologically valid studies, no conclusions can yet be drawn about the proliferation and workings of any one of these methods.

With regard to unconscious influence on consumer actions, by contrast, there is by now a significant body of research.² Unconsciously triggered behavior undermines self-control, but this need not be the case for authenticity because self-relevance and congruence with the self may be regulated automatically. For this reason I will limit the current discussion to the effects of unconscious influence on self-control. There are three such routes of influence that are facilitated by different moderators and which are all problematic from the point of view of self-control (see figure 4.1). One route operates through a direct perception-behavior link (paths 1,2,7), another by means of the activation of trait concepts (paths 3,4,7) and a third route via the activation of goals (paths 5,6,7).³ The first route of mimicry is an ancient mechanism that activates behavioral schemes directly and facilitates liking for others.

Trait and goal activation are more complicated. In trait activation (or semantic activation), associative structures are activated if they are congruent with the self-concept and may activate behavior in the very short term. In goal activation, a goal of the so called ought self or ideal self is activated, and may be kept active as long as no feedback is received about its satisfaction. Moreover, a discrepancy between the ought or ideal self and the active self increases the motivation of the unconsciously primed goal (where the prime itself is conscious but its effect in causing behavior is not). Below I discuss studies concerning the effect of these three routes at the point of purchase (1.1) and the point of consumption (1.2) respectively.

1.1 Unconscious Point of Purchase Influence

The image haunting Dennett in his discussion of self-control is that of the Sphex (a type of wasp), whose rigid program lends itself to easy manipulations by pitiless biologists.⁴ The Sphex reproduces herself by building a burrow, dragging a paralyzed insect inside and laying her eggs alongside it. In doing so, the Sphex displays an interesting routine. She is programmed to throw down the insect at the entrance of the burrow and to walk around in circles in order to find out whether there is danger lurking in the dark. If all is clear, she picks up the insect and drags it inside. However, if the insect is pulled back a bit by a human observer while the Sphex is running around in circles – having almost finished inspecting

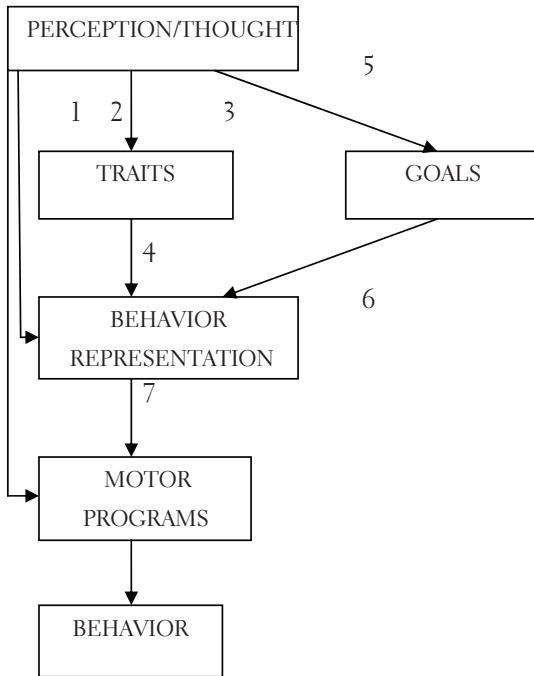


Figure 2.1 Routes of automatic behavior. From: Ap Dijksterhuis, Tanya Chartrand, and Henk Aarts, “Effects of Priming and Perception on Social Behavior and Goal Pursuit”, in: John Bargh ed., *Social Psychology and the Unconscious. The Automaticity of Higher Mental Processes* (New York 2007), 51-132, there 58.

her burrow – and laid down outside of the hole, the routine repeats itself: the insect is pulled up to the threshold of the burrow and the Sphex starts a new inspection round. This process has reportedly been repeated up to forty times. Such cases leave one wondering to which extent human beings can be manipulated in a similar but of course more sophisticated way (either by aliens with a superior intelligence or by fellow human beings with superior knowledge). Surely, we will take note of repeating an action forty times. But if behavior can be unconsciously triggered – below the radar of our far more impressive cognitive defenses – then it can legitimately be asked to what extent human beings entering shops are like Sphexes entering their burrows. In this section I discuss the three routes by which such manipulation may occur. I first discuss mimicry of other consumers and of salespeople and then take goal and trait activation together (as it is not clear from all studies which one is activated) and discuss their application in terms of auditory, olfactory and visual cues.

Mimicry

There is by now an extensive literature documenting the effect of mimicry of body posture, speech patterns, syntax, accent, facial expression and hand movements on rapport. It turns out that the causality of this relation goes both ways. When we like somebody, we start to mimic that person, and we also start to like a person if she mimics us. The latter effect has been documented in real world environments. That is, it has been demonstrated that a wait-

ress who repeats orders by customers in fact earns more money from tips than if she paraphrases orders. And people whose body posture is being mimicked are also more likely to give to charity.⁵ We may expect two ways in which mimicry can influence consumer decisions in shops: consumers may mimic others, and they may be influenced by others mimicking them. That is, consumers may be influenced by product choices by others in the shop, and they could be more likely to purchase products that are promoted by salespeople who mimic them.

In a series of experiments, Robin Tanner and colleagues tested both of these possibilities.⁶ Evidence that consumers may mimic others in making decisions comes from an experiment on preferences for crackers. In it, participants were presumably to do a test on recall of advertisements. To this end, they were shown a video of a person who was said to be an earlier participant (but who was in fact a confederate) and read advertisements to them. She was told, in the video, by an experimenter that she could eat from two bowls that were placed in front of her. One bowl contained animal crackers and the other contained giant goldfish crackers, while the confederate – in two conditions – ate consistently from only one of the bowls. A second manipulation was to allow one group of participants who watched the video to eat from two similar bowls, while giving a second group no such option. Afterwards, participants were asked to rate – in a presumable unrelated task – product preferences for products which included both types of crackers. If mimicry mediates consumer preferences, Tanner and colleagues reasoned, then enhanced preference for one of the crackers among those who could eat from the bowls should be correlated with their mimicking the cracker consumption of the confederate in the video. And that was indeed the case.

In a second experiment, evidence was provided for thinking that mimicry by a salesperson can influence brand preference. Participants were divided into a mimic group and a no-mimic group and supposedly met a salesperson who promoted an imaginary new soft drink called Vigor. In both conditions the salesperson conducted a tightly scripted interview about soft drink use, so that as little room as possible was left for spontaneous interactions that could interfere with the design. In the mimic condition, the salesman mimicked body movements with a delay of 1-2 seconds (and for the opposite side of the body, hence the name mirroring). In the no-mimic conditions by contrast, he reversed the procedure, so that when a participant bowed over the table, he would sit straight up. In a survey following the interview it was found that both the liking for the brand as well as purchase and physical consumption intention were significantly higher in the mimic-condition.

Taken together, these studies show that in laboratory settings consumers can be induced to develop a preference for a brand by means of mimicry. Field studies will have to establish whether these techniques will work in practice. It must furthermore be noted that both cases of mimicry induction involved considerable amounts of time. With regard to consumers mimicking *others*, the application for brand managers would be to hire actors to ostensibly buy their products, which will typically be noticed only briefly by consumers. If mimicry is to boost sales then, it is to be proven that short observations also have such effects (as this is what happens in actual shop environments). With regard to consumers *being* mimicked, the present research could explain persuasion in longer salesperson-customer interaction such as in car sales.⁷ Such cases would also fall within the scope of my present argument, because care salesmen are often closely aligned with the brand manufacturer and can hence be said to be part of the organizational complex that manages a brand. For both kinds of mimicry the practical relevance is mediated by the risk of consumers finding out about the practice. Such effects have as of yet not been studied however.⁸

Goal and Trait Activation

Studies investigating the more complex unconscious goal and trait activation can be organized according to the perceptual channel through which the influence stimuli enter the brain. As such, I will present experiments that demonstrate such effects for auditory, olfactory and visual primes. The perhaps most studied unconscious prime in retail environments is music. It is uncontested that music can have a beneficial impact on sales in general. Adrian North and David Hargreaves for example found that playing classical or pop music enhanced sales in a cafeteria more than did silence or playing pleasant music.⁹ More interestingly, in another study North and colleagues found that playing German music in a store increased sales of German wines, while playing French music increased sales of French wine. Afterwards, consumers displayed no awareness of the relation between hearing such music and their wine purchases.¹⁰ The temporal distance between the auditory prime and the purchase decision was not manipulated however (which could have been done by playing the music at the entrance of the store and measuring the average traveling time to the wine section), so that it is unclear whether the effect was due to unconscious goal pursuit or unconscious trait activation.

There is evidence for thinking that smell can activate behavior unconsciously as well. Rob Holland and colleagues mixed some citrus scent into a bucket of lukewarm water that was covertly placed in the laboratory. When subjects were asked to list activities they wanted to engage in, they were more likely to list cleaning activities if the bucket was in the room. In a follow up study it was found that subjects who smelled the citrus flavor were also more likely to clean up their crumbs after eating a cookie (which was established by counting the crumbs participants left over). In both studies participants were not aware of either the bucket or the citrus smell.¹¹ A number of studies have furthermore demonstrated that smells that are rated as pleasant in general enhance sales.¹² Taken together, this evidence suggests that brand stores that use scents to unconsciously activate goals and traits related to brand purchasing behavior may actually succeed in doing so.

The most sophisticated research in priming consumers has been conducted with regard to visual cues. Specifically, Tanya Chartrand and colleagues have made a strong case for thinking that such primes can unconsciously activate goals (rather than merely activate traits).¹³ In an experiment they presented a scrambled-sentence task in which subjects were to compose four-word sentences out of five scrambled words. For one group the spare fifth word was occupied by words related to status and in another group by words related to frugality. Subjects were then presented with a text in which a situation was sketched in which they had to choose between buying one pair of Nike socks (for 5,25 dollar) or two pairs of cheaper Hanes socks (for 6 dollar). As predicted, more subjects chose the Nike option in the status priming condition (48%) than in the frugality priming condition (19.2%) while they reported no awareness of a relation between the scrambled sentence task and the product choice task.¹⁴

In follow up studies it was shown that the effect was due to goal activation and not trait activation because the effect grew stronger after a time delay (i.e. 3 minutes versus 8 minutes). More evidence for this interpretation emerged from a study in which one group primed with status made a hypothetical choice for socks whereas another group primed with status made a real choice for socks (i.e. they could actually take them home). Afterwards, subjects in both groups moved to another room in which they were told that a lottery was organized for participants in the experiment, and that they were to make a choice out of two options in case they would win. In one option they could choose a high status watch and 25 dollars in cash, and in the other option they could choose a lower status watch and about 75

dollar in cash. Goal satisfaction turned out to make a real difference. Whereas status primed subjects were 43% more likely to choose the high status option in the lottery task against thrift primed subjects, this effect disappeared completely for status primed subjects who had made a *real* choice for socks before (i.e. they could take them home).¹⁵ Because satisfaction of a goal has been shown to lead to its deactivation, this is strong evidence for interpreting the priming exercises as activating goals and not traits.

So far the studies are relevant insofar as they indicate the possibility for retailers to place status displays in their shops to activate unconscious status consumption goals.¹⁶ In a final study, Chartrand and colleagues proposed that brands *themselves* may serve the same purpose, since they have already been associated with status (as in the case of Tiffany, Neiman Marcus and Nordstrom) or thrift (for which were selected Wall-Mart, Kmart and Dollar Store). Store brand names of both groups were subliminally flashed repeatedly on a computer screen (for 60 milliseconds with a backward mask of 100 milliseconds) after which subjects were to choose between high and low status socks and microwaves. As predicted, subliminally primed store brands that are associated with status correlated more strongly with choices for high status options than store brands that are associated with thrift.¹⁷

Looking back on the evidence of effects of mimicry as well as unconscious goal and trait activation on consumer choice we can return to the question of whether consumers in shops are controlled like Sphexes. There is some evidence that they are. Mirroring behavior by covert and overt store employees, smells, music and a range of visual cues can all be employed by store managers to trigger purchasing behavior outside of the awareness of consumers. However, human beings are not Sphexes. We have superior learning and reasoning capacities as well as the capacity to act upon such reasoning. Although consumers today may not know the nuts and bolts of unconscious in-store persuasion, it can be argued that they could potentially learn about these effects.¹⁸ Whether such an education project is realistic is a different matter however. For now, I conclude with the caveat that since the scope of my overall argument is limited to the effect of branding, these studies are relevant only with regard to effects of store brands and atmospheric effects in shops that sell a single brand exclusively (such as certain car retail stores or clothing stores).

1.2 Unconscious Point of Consumption Influence

The second realm in which branding may undermine the autonomy of consumer action is the point at which products are consumed. Because most products are consumed at home, the best shot at unconsciously priming people to consume more of a brand is via mass media. In one experiment, Jennifer Harris and colleagues tested the effect of television food advertising on eating behavior of both children and adults.¹⁹ In the first experiment children watched a 14 minutes episode of 'Disney's Recess' which was interrupted by two breaks with a total of four 30 second real-world commercials. The manipulation was that one group saw commercials for unhealthy snack food, while another group saw children's commercials for non-food products. As they watched, children were given goldfish crackers. As predicted, those who watched the food advertisements – which were unrelated to the goldfish crackers – ate more (8,8 grams to be precise).²⁰

In a second experiment, adults watched a 16 minutes long episode of a comedy show with 4 minutes of commercials with different content in different conditions. In one condition four commercials for snack foods (with hedonic appeal) were added, in another condition four commercials for nutritious foods were inserted, and in a control group no food advertisements were included at all. Participants were told that the study investigated the

effect of TV watching on mood, and that commercials had not been cut out to make the TV watching as realistic as possible. In a presumably unrelated follow up study in another room, subjects then rated a range of healthy and not so healthy foods and were told that they could eat as much as they liked. After controlling for gender and restrained eaters (i.e. people who are dieting, as they are more vulnerable to food cues) it turned out that subjects in the snack commercial condition ate far more than those in the non-food condition and the healthy food condition.²¹ In both studies, subjects had no awareness of a relation between the food commercials and their food consumption. Further evidence for the explanation of the effect in terms of an automatic mechanism is the fact that none of the foods that were actually consumed was mentioned in the commercials. Snack food commercials associate eating with fun and enjoyment, which appears to activate eating behavior either by activating a goal or a trait. Which one of these mechanisms facilitated the effect was not investigated however.²²

In any case, because the effect of the hedonic snack advertisements appears to boost eating behavior in general, the technique is a very crude one from a brand managerial perspective. It is moreover questionable whether the steering of unconsciously activated behavior can be further refined in light of the finding that health food commercials did not increase the consumption of healthy foods over the other two conditions. That said, the unconscious effect of commercials on consumption is real and advantageous at least for market leaders in a food category.

2 How Branding Changes Mental States

With regard to mental state formation there is no need at this stage to analyze the consequences for self-control and authenticity separately. As we have seen, mental state acquisition induced by negative affect and evaluative conditioning is a potential violation of autonomy from both perspectives. Relevant differences will surface only when we consider retrievable intentions in section 4. What we would want to see here is evidence from the laboratory for thinking that the processing mechanisms that were said to bypass cognitive defense structures can be used successfully to change attitudes towards brands (2.1).

Moreover, for such instances of autonomy violation to be relevant on the present analysis, they have to stand in a structural relation to stable features of the branding environment. The most important such feature was said to be sales, so that we also need evidence for thinking that brand attitudes that are the result of processing that bypasses defense mechanisms are effective in triggering sales (2.2). It could be argued that these laboratory experiments tell us little about the messy real world in which branding occurs. In response to this concern I give suggestive evidence from the historical record of advertising for thinking that the normatively relevant type of evaluative conditioning has been deployed on a large scale, and specify how this claim could be tested more robustly (2.3).

2.1 The Mechanics of Autonomy Violating Attitude Change in Branding

Because there is no research on introjection of purchasing goals in branding, I will focus here on evaluative conditioning. In chapter 2 I established that there is a mechanism that can change attitudes out of the reach of both awareness and consistency checks (i.e. evalua-

tive and non-evaluative covariation learning). In this section my aim is to give evidence for the effectiveness of these mechanisms in changing attitudes towards both new and well known brands. Although there is no obvious reason for thinking that brands are attitude objects of a type that is resistant to conditioning effects, it is better to rule out this possibility. One would moreover want to see evidence of conditioning effects of brands that are paired with USi that are commonly used in advertising.

With regard to attitudes towards new brands, Steven Sweldens and colleagues compared the effects of misattribution and stimulus-stimulus evaluative conditioning (EC).²³ In misattribution trials, the conditioned stimulus (CS) was simultaneously paired with several unconditioned stimuli (USi) of the same valence, so that the affect is more likely to be attached to the CS directly. In stimulus-stimulus trials the CS was sequentially paired with the same US, so that the affect was transferred to the CS indirectly (via the US). Pairing the CS simultaneously with the same positive US (e.g. pictures of people having fun) was reasoned to fall somewhere in between these procedures. In two experiments using only explicit attitude measures it was shown that American students thought more positively about Belgian beers after both types of EC procedures, but that the reevaluation of the relevant US wiped out the affect transfer only for sequential-same trials. That is, when the pictures of happy people were associated with felonies after the conditioning trials, this affected the evaluation of the beer brand only if it had been associated with the same happy face sequentially.

Moreover, awareness of CS and US appearing together only affected students in the sequential-same condition. In another study it was shown that when students were asked after the conditioning trials to learn about which breweries produce which Belgian beer, the effects on sequential-same EC were wiped out, but not those of simultaneous-different EC. Again, awareness did not affect responses in the simultaneous-different condition in this experiment. Finally, and more interestingly, when students were told after the conditioning trials that in rating the beers they should not be affected by the pictures with which the beers had just been associated, only participants in the sequential-same condition were able to correct their explicit attitudes. But even they did still show a conditioning effect, which the authors take to suggest that the mechanisms underlying such conditioning may not be entirely propositional.²⁴

Another set of studies changed the USi with which a new CS (i.e. a brand) was associated. Instead of pictures of people having fun, taken from the International Affective Picture System (which are typically used in EC), Madelijn Strick and colleagues used humorous cartoons (as well as only implicit measurements, taken by an affective priming task). In trials that were far more realistic than the typical pairing of stimuli against a black background used in typical EC trials, 20 humorous cartoons were in one condition inserted in a magazine of which two pages were shown on a screen for ten seconds. With each page turn, subjects were asked to focus on the object with yellow lines around it, which was either a cartoon or a filler. One group saw humorous cartoon and another group saw cartoons that had been rated as not funny. Moreover, some brands were consistently shown on pages with humorous ads and others on pages with nonhumorous ads. It was shown that the priming of both an energy drink and a ballpoint brand that had been associated with humor facilitated significantly shorter response times in later affective priming tasks that involved the words beautiful and good. Interestingly, participants showed not only no awareness of the conditioning effect, but brands that had been associated with humor were also less well recognized.²⁵ Because both funny people and humor figure prominently in advertising, it is plausible that EC mechanisms facilitate real world effects of advertising.

So far we have considered conditioning trials for brands that were new to subjects. This represents of course a small portion of the total amount of branding. We would therefore want to have evidence for effects of evaluative conditioning on brands with which subjects are highly familiar. Such evidence has been provided by Brian Gibson in an experiment in which attitudes for Coca Cola and Pepsi were changed by conditioning trials.²⁶ In a pretest, subjects were asked – among many other tasks – to rate their preferences for Pepsi and Coke. Respondents with attitudes at the extreme ends and the center of the distribution were asked to return. All three groups were then confronted with five rounds in which they saw 86 diverse images that were paired with other images or words, and were instructed to hit a key whenever a certain soft drink appeared (this was always a different soft drink from Pepsi or Coke). Interwoven in these trials were four images of Pepsi paired in one condition with positive images and in another condition with negative images, as well as four images of Coke which were paired with USi of the opposite valence. Gibson reasoned that none of the three groups should show any explicit attitude change, because of the strong explicit attitude networks of the brands. However, with regard to implicit attitude measures, he found that although lovers and haters of a brand were not affected by either positive or negative stimuli, those in the neutral condition were.

As an explanation for this effect Gibson argues that evaluative conditioning can activate an implicit associative network but that this is only possible if there are both positive and negative associations. For the neutral group these associations were assumed to reside in a state of balance and so could be tipped to one side by the conditioning trials. An explanation in terms of direct affect transfer would be that those with strong positive or negative attitudes had strong affective implicit attitudes, whereas those in a neutral state did not. So on this account the newly attached affect could only have an impact if there were no strong positive or negative affective relations to be overcome. Either way, the process is a violation of autonomy because Gibson found that the level of awareness was inversely related to the effectiveness of the conditioning trials.²⁷

2.2 How Autonomy Violating Brand Attitudes Cause Sales

If autonomy violation by unconscious conditioning were to be structural, then the implicit attitudes it brings about should predict sales over and above effects of explicit attitudes. In a recent overview, Malte Friese and colleagues considered eleven studies that investigated this relation. The common finding of these studies on the consumption of fair trade products, yogurt, fruit, vegetables, restaurant meals, Coke and Pepsi was that implicit attitudes have at best a very small effect on consumption choices. That is, if subjects are to choose in the laboratory any one of these products in a survey or in the form of a real pick, then implicit attitudes do not substantially explain why they do so. However, the authors note that such results are precisely what one would expect to find if dual system theories of decision making are correct.²⁸ That is, implicit attitudes are not expected to predict choices when subjects have all the time in the world to make a decision. This is also what one would expect from the nature of the measures in the first place. Survey responses are typically given without time constraints, while implicit measures tap small differences in very quick reaction times. It is therefore only natural to expect that when consumers make decisions under circumstances that reflect filling in a survey, explicit attitudes will better predict such choices. By corollary, under impaired processing conditions (which I will specify in a moment) the effect of implicit attitudes should be larger.

In their overview, Friese and colleagues report on seven studies – mostly carried out by the authors themselves – that have manipulated conditions to facilitate controlled decision making versus impulsive decision making.²⁹ Which decision-making system is activated depends on four factors, which have all been put to the test. First, time pressure should facilitate impulsive decision making. One study measured subject's implicit and explicit attitudes towards two sets of similar groceries where one was branded and the other set was not. Participants were then divided into a group with congruent implicit and explicit preferences for one of the sets, and a group with incongruent implicit and explicit attitudes. When asked to choose a set and to take as much time as they wanted, 80% of the choices of subjects in both conditions were explained on the basis of their explicit attitudes. However, for subjects who had to choose within five seconds it turned out that for those with incongruent attitudes – which is the group in which the effect of implicit attitudes can be observed – 60% of choices were predicted by implicit attitudes.³⁰

Second, cognitive capacity should facilitate deliberative processing. To test this assumption, another experiment measured implicit and explicit attitudes towards fruit and chocolate and then had participants make a decision without time constraints. However, in one condition subjects meanwhile had to memorize an eight digit number (and thus had little spare capacity to make a decision) while in another condition subjects memorized only one digit (and thus had a lot of capacity left). As predicted, choices under high cognitive load were hardly related to explicit attitudes and significantly related to implicit attitudes.³¹ The impact of cognitive load on product choice has also been studied for brands. In his experiment on evaluative conditioning of attitudes for Coke and Pepsi, Gibson ended by an on screen product choice test in which he asked half of the participants to memorize an eight digit number. As predicted, under high cognitive load implicit brand-related attitudes were predictive of brand preference.³²

At least for new brands there is evidence – from a study by Gibson and Redker on new beer brands which were paired with the same USi (country music) – that even choices absent cognitive load might be related to implicit attitude change (resulting from EC trials). Two weeks in advance of the experiment, Gibson and Redker had subjects rate their preference for country music after which those at the extreme ends were called back and asked to participate in the main experiment. Here they saw a number of web advertisements on a computer screen among which were ads for the beer brands Fitz's and Sparky's (which are local beers from a different region than the one in which the experiment took place) accompanied with country music. As predicted, those who hated country music rated the beer in question less favorably on both explicit and implicit measures and those who loved country music showed the opposite pattern. More importantly, when participants at the end of the experiment were told that they had earned a beer and could choose between Fitz's and Sparky's on their screens (without any kind of pressure being exerted on them), implicit attitudes predicted unique variance in choice compared to explicit attitudes.³³ More evidence for this thesis comes from the experiment by Strick and colleagues on humor in advertising. They found that implicit attitudes that resulted from simultaneous-different EC trials predicted choice for ballpoints and energy drinks.³⁴

Third and fourth, both the depletion of self-control and alcohol use should facilitate impulsive behavior. As I noted in chapter 2.2, there is evidence for thinking that self-control functions like a muscle because, among other things, it can be depleted. Under these conditions implicit attitudes should better predict behavior. According to alcohol myopia theory, alcohol impairs the allocation of attention to goals. If system 2 processes require more attention resources, then system 1 processes should more effectively influence behavior in condi-

tions of alcohol consumption. Both predictions were tested only for physical consumption. Depletion of self-control (by the suppression of emotion after watching a film clip) led to a greater predictive value of implicit attitudes towards potato chips with regard the amount of chips eaten on a subsequent taste test. And vodka consumption enhanced the predictive power of implicit attitudes towards candy which were thereafter consumed.³⁵ The latter two studies are of course not evidence of purchasing behavior, but increased consumption at home is probably correlated with future purchases.

If it is true that implicit attitudes are predictive of sales under time pressure, cognitive load, self-control depletion and alcohol use, then we must go on to ask whether such circumstances reflect actual shopping conditions to a significant degree. If such impulse facilitating conditions are a rare phenomenon, then implicit attitude change will not cause many sales. And that would mean that there is also no structural incentive on the part of brand managers to bring it about. In this regard there is only circumstantial evidence, but this evidence points in the direction of a significant role for impulsive behavior in shopping. In US supermarkets 62% of purchases are impulsive – defined as made up on the spot – with percentages up to 80% in certain product categories.³⁶ Impulsive purchases are less likely for cars and houses and more likely for food, with consumer electronics and the like located somewhere in between. Moreover, Friese and colleagues note that conditions which facilitate impulsive action occur chronically. When moving through the supermarket we often think about our next meeting, had a beer, make phone calls, want to catch a train, are under pressure from a waiter or do our shopping at the end of the day when our self-control resources have been depleted.³⁷

2.3 Historical Evidence of Autonomy Violation in Brand Attitude Change

So far, my case for thinking that successful branding structurally involves processing that undermines autonomy has relied on laboratory work. This case would be considerably stronger if I were able to demonstrate that such processing is correlated with enhanced sales in the real world. After all, there might be sources of influence that annul the effects of conditioning. In order to make such an argument, one would want to identify properties of advertisements (or combinations of such properties) that signal autonomy violation in combination with specified conditions. That is, if advertisements that use evaluative conditioning are more effective in causing sales for messages that are likely to induce conflict, then this is evidence for autonomy violating mental state formation.³⁸ One way to test these hypotheses would be to manipulate properties of advertisements in a split-cable/customer card setting, but such a research project would be very expensive. I will therefore outline another method, which relies on the historical records of advertisements and sales and is therefore easier to test. It asks whether autonomy violating properties of advertisements are correlated with higher sales (than sales for comparable products in the same market) under conditions that are assumed to favor their effectiveness.

A problem with testing whether evaluative conditioning occurs in advertising is that stimuli appear together everywhere in advertisements.³⁹ In order to make its occurrence testable all the same, I will in the first subsection draw on research which suggests that the processing of metaphors and puns is of the associative type (as in evaluative conditioning). Studies that quantify the occurrence of metaphors and puns in US text advertisements shows that they are used in 45% of text ads, while other studies show that this percentage has gone

up steadily (at least with regard to US magazine advertisements) during the past half century.⁴⁰ If evaluative conditioning were the only plausible effect of metaphors and puns, then we would have a very strong case for thinking that it is used widely in branding. But it is not. In the second subsection I discuss the main rival account that explains the success of tropes equally well on the basis of the enhanced elaboration it evokes. In the final subsection, I will rely upon my theoretical framework developed in chapter 3 to specify the conditions under which the two theories about metaphors make contradictory predictions.

The Associative Processing Account of Tropes

Although distinctions between rhetorical figures are not wholly uncontested, there is wide agreement on the distinction between schemes and tropes.⁴¹ That is, it is agreed that schemes involve an excess of regularity (e.g. rhyme, alliteration) whereas tropes are characterized by irregularity. Within the latter category a distinction is made between substitution tropes (e.g. metonymy, hyperbole) and destabilization tropes (metaphor, pun, irony and paradox). All variants of the latter category involve the entertainment of multiple interpretations at a time, and that is the feature that is presently relevant. For if several associations in relation to an attitude object are presumably spontaneously generated, then the co-occurrence of these associations with the attitude object may facilitate conditioning effects by means of associative processing. There are two relevant lines of research that support such an interpretation.

First, there is work on the generation of associations for advertising metaphors by Edward McQuarrie and Barbara Philips.⁴² Following pragmatic theories in linguistics, these authors assume that all interpretation relies on the generation of inferences about stimuli. For some stimuli there will be wide agreement in a culture on which inferences are appropriate (i.e. strong inferences). But when there is no such agreement, the mind will generate a great number of inferences until it has found an appropriate fit (i.e. weak inferences). Metaphors by definition involve the latter process. In order to test this claim, McQuarrie and Philips relied on response times in order to infer whether weak inferences had been generated or not. The basic assumption of this method is that inferences that are generated at the time at which the metaphor was processed will lead to shorter response times when people are asked to assert these inferences later (because retrieval is on average faster than online generation).

Thus, subjects were shown a number of advertising metaphors and asked to focus on the multiple meanings the producers of the advertisements might have intended. They were then asked to assert or reject possible meanings devised by the researchers in advance. On the basis of pre-testing, they had found that certain meanings are extremely unlikely, and including them arbitrarily in the set avoided automatic assertions on the part of subjects. Now, if assertions of proposed meanings of the metaphor took less response time than rejections, this was interpreted as evidence for spontaneous generation at the time of initial metaphor processing. The reasoning behind this assumption is that if spontaneous interpretations are formed, then assertions should be made quicker (these can now be retrieved instead of generated online) while rejections should take more time (because more stored interpretations are scanned). Such an effect was found for visual metaphors (without anchoring).⁴³ There has as of yet not been any follow up studies on the way in which such associations influence the evaluation of the attitude object, which must involve some form of linking and may or may not involve autonomy violation.

A second line of research by Claudiu Dimofte and Richard Yalch uses implicit measures to suggest that much more interpretations are spontaneously generated by destabilizing

tropes besides the interpretations of visual metaphors that McQuarrie and Philips uncovered.⁴⁴ They moreover measured the effect of these interpretations on brand evaluation and the way in which this effect is mediated. The main tool of Dimofte and Yalch is their Secondary Meaning Access via the Automatic Route Test (SMAART). In this test, subjects are asked to assess the literal truth of a range of sentences (e.g. cars are fast). Some of these sentences are metaphors (e.g. cars are snails) and some sentences are just nonsense (e.g. roses are insects). When subjects show longer response times for metaphorical sentences (but not for nonsense sentences) the effect is supposed to be caused by automatic generation of secondary interpretations. If this tool is valid, then one can suppose that subjects with a high SMAART score should be better at grasping puns in advertising than those with a low score. Thus, by presenting a pun with a negative secondary meaning, high SMAART subjects should rate the brand in question less favorably.

For their study Dimofte and Yalch used the slogan 'raising the bar' for the brand Cingular (which offered an exclusive wireless phone service). The positive primary meaning of this pun was that the technology of the product was of a particularly good and innovative quality, while the negative *secondary* meaning was that consumers may not have been able to meet the credit rating conditions after the 'bar was raised'. On explicit ratings of the brand after exposure to the pun (accompanied by a powerpoint presentation) subjects with high SMAART scores evaluated the brand, as predicted, less favorably than low SMAART subjects. Even more revealing were tests of the process that mediated this outcome. For what Dimofte and Yalch found was that high SMAART subjects showed evidence of grasping the secondary negative meaning only on an Implicit Association Test and not when asked to rate explicitly how easy it would be for them to acquire the product.⁴⁵ Hence, it must have been associative and not propositional processing that caused the negative overall evaluation of the Cingular brand. And such processing involves autonomy violation.

In sum, both the spontaneous generation of meanings for visual metaphors as well as puns lend themselves to evaluative conditioning. When visual metaphors are processed, multiple meanings are generated which can be recalled. Such meanings may have a strong valence and so release positive or negative affect which can then by means of misattribution or by associative linking be attached to the attitude object (i.e. the brand). In other words, the meanings that are spontaneously generated can function as USi that condition a CS. Moreover, if the negative secondary meaning of a pun influences the evaluation of an attitude object and these negative meanings can only be retrieved on implicit measures, then this must be due to some associative link between the negative evaluation and the attitude object. However, as I mentioned earlier, we should be careful in explaining the success of tropes in advertising in relation to evaluative conditioning effects, because of research that suggests an alternative explanation.

The Enhanced Elaboration Account of Tropes

A second explanation of the occurrence of tropes in advertising is that they enhance deliberative processing. This approach may seem to contradict the associative approach, but that is in fact not the case. The resolution of this paradox is that the elaboration effects that have been documented do not pertain to the rhetorical figures themselves, but to the content and form of the advertisement they are part of. Thus, the metaphor above an advertisement may arouse interest and cause a reader to read it and its arguments more carefully. Evidence for this theory comes mainly from experiments carried out by David Mothersbaugh and colleagues. In one experiment it was found that when subjects read a mock magazine – devised for the purpose of the study – they paid more attention to an advertisement for ball points

when it carried in its headline either a scheme (e.g. “One pen – More ink”) or a trope (e.g. “Bingley pens are full of it”), where the effect of the latter was greater than that of the former.⁴⁶ The measure of greater readership was obtained by means of a questionnaire that was attached to the back of the mock magazine. When participants came across this questionnaire, they were not allowed to leave back. In it, participants had to simply relate whether they had read the ad for the pen. Subsequent manipulations revealed that the enhanced readership effect of rhetorical figures was greater when texts were longer or the relevance of the information was lower.

In another set of variations on this experiment, the researchers asked subjects to “list all thoughts, ideas, images, or reactions” they experienced as they watched the advertisement.⁴⁷ Neutral raters later divided these words into two groups: one for messages related to the content of the pen advertisement and one related to the style of the advertisement. Interestingly, it was found that when schemes were used in the headline, subjects generated more thoughts related to both content and style (compared to a headline without a rhetorical figure), and that when a trope was used subjects generated more words related to just the content. Raters also coded the responses of participants for their valence. On this basis it was found that if rhetorical figures were used, more positive brand evaluations were obtained when the advertisement for the pen contained strong arguments (‘the ink cartridge contains 65% more ink’) than if weak arguments were used (‘the ink cartridge contains 2% more ink’). And tropes led to greater appreciation of argument strength than schemes, and thus – one may safely suppose – greater elaboration.⁴⁸ Thus, on this reading the greater increase in tropes compared to schemes in the advertising record is explained with reference to greater message elaboration rather than evaluative conditioning.

Testing Why Tropes Have Proliferated in Advertising

We have seen that the associative and the elaboration account both predict that destabilizing tropes will be more successful than schemes.⁴⁹ Thus, it is possible that the entire effect of associative processing of metaphors does nothing to enhance the effectiveness of advertisements, and that this effect is entirely due to enhanced elaboration. In that case no autonomy violation would be involved in the targeted use of tropes. In order to rule out this possibility we would have to find a condition under which the use of tropes should increase on the associative account but not on the elaboration account. As such a condition will count conflict perception. That is, on the elaboration account, advertisements that contain propositions that are contrary to what an agent believes to be valuable will decrease the persuasiveness of the message (and thus purchase intention). On the associative account, by contrast, metaphors and puns are an excellent device to *bypass* conflict perception. All thing being equal, advertisements with such tropes should therefore lead to more sales.

This argument can be usefully operationalized on the basis of my framework on the structure of branding that was developed in chapter 3. If this framework is correct, then appeals to the affiliation, mating and status motivation modules inherently generate conflict in the consumer. Thus, metaphors and puns that appear in advertisements with cues that activate the three higher-order social motivations should generate more sales (than advertisements that appeal to other motivations) if the associative account is correct. On the other hand, if the sales-enhancing effect of metaphors and puns were due to elaboration, then no such effect should be found. In that case, metaphors and puns in advertisements with higher-order social motivation cues should lead to enhanced elaboration of their content, so that more conflict would be perceived and sales of the respective products would be *impaired*.

3 The Centrality of Autonomy Violation in Branding

The above cases of autonomy violation in branding only violate liberal autonomy if they are sufficiently central to persons at the receiving end. Let me for the purpose of clarity note that I distinguish the centrality of autonomy violation (as discussed in chapter 2.4) from its structural nature (as discussed in chapter 3). The structural nature of autonomy violation is determined in relation to the agent who *commits* the autonomy violation (e.g. an organization that acts as a controller or authenticity violator). The centrality of autonomy violation, by contrast, is determined in relation to features of the person who is the *object* of autonomy violation (e.g. the consumer). Thus, there can be cases in which an organization structurally violates autonomy (because of stable institutional features) with effects that are only marginally central to receiving subjects. And there can be cases in which an organization only accidentally violates autonomy, but has a central impact on receiving subjects when it does. The centrality of autonomy violation is measured objectively in terms of the sheer quantity of conscious thoughts and behaviors. Thus, if I acquire an implicit attitude towards ice skating which never impacts either my conscious thoughts or behaviors (maybe because I moved to Australia), then this attitude is not central. Below I will argue that the influence of branding goes beyond such peripheral effects and that it has a central impact on consumers.

3.1 The Centrality of Autonomous Action Violation in Branding

Because purchasing and consumption actions are potentially public events, their effects in terms of conscious thoughts and other behaviors can be mediated either by the agent herself or by other agents. In the first type of case, the agent herself mediates all the effects of purchasing actions and consumption actions. Specifically, such effects of purchasing actions are mediated by two mechanisms. The first one is known in the persuasion literature as the commitment and consistency mechanism and has been studied extensively in hundreds of experiments on cognitive dissonance reduction. Once we have committed ourselves to buying a product (in this case in a way that violated autonomy) then the power of consistency guides us in the direction of future actions that are consistent with that purchase. That is, when we were led to buy a car that represents an upper middle class lifestyle, there may be pressure to buy other commodities that are in line with that lifestyle. The same mechanism may also create a threshold amount of dissonance that would lead our conscious thoughts to align with our actions, provided such an alignment would be the way of least resistance (if it is not, then people would throw away the product).

The second mechanism by which the agent herself mediates the effects of purchasing acts occurs via conscious thoughts. Recent research by Ji Park and Deborah John suggests that carrying around a product (either a Victoria's secret shopping bag or an MIT pen) can cause personality traits that are associated with those products to 'rub off' on consumers.⁵⁰ That is, women who carried around a Victoria's secret shopping bag in a mall for one hour, later reported stronger associations between the self and personality traits that were associated with that brand (i.e. good-looking, feminine and glamorous). Likewise, men who used a MIT pen for six weeks afterwards showed stronger associations with intelligence, being a leader and working hard (traits that were previously shown to be associated with MIT).

Interestingly, this rubbing off effect only occurred for people who had a so called 'entity theory' about the self. This concept is derived from the so called Implicit Persons Theory

Measure, which determines one's score along the extremes of believing that one's personality is unchangeable (entity theory) to believing that one's personality is malleable (incremental theory). The explanation of this effect is that self theories activate different strategies for managing public impressions. Entity theorists do not see options for improvement and therefore allocate energy to signaling their traits, while incremental theorists *do* see possibilities for improvement and therefore allocate their energy not to signaling abilities and traits but to improving them. Suggestive evidence for this interpretation comes from an experiment in which a threat to self-perceived intelligence led to a preference for an MIT pen over a regular pen only for entity theorists. Supposedly, only entity theorists are interested in signaling high intelligence as a means of making up for a perceived deficit in that trait.

In the second group of cases our purchasing act leads other people to act in a way that causes us to act (or think) in response. Thus, when I am led to buy a new suit, a colleague may respond by buying a classier suit for himself, which in turn may lead me to up the ante. A recent study found direct evidence for such arms races, in that it was shown that people who lived in a street in which all inhabitants who had bought a state lottery ticket won a price spent more money on cars even if they had not bought a ticket (compared to similar people in other streets).⁵¹

In the case of consumption behavior, effects that are mediated by others include responses of disgust, approval or even imitation, which may lead to responses on the part of the agent herself in turn. Effects that are directly mediated (by the agent herself) may include – apart from consistency mechanisms – addiction circuits (although the mere act of purchasing may also trigger addiction circuits). Consumption acts may also have negative health consequences, as pointed out by Mitchell and colleagues in their study of television advertising and food consumption. They calculated that children who watched one hour of commercial television a day (which is far below average) would gain 14 pounds in weight a year (if food consumption would not decrease during regular meals). Especially this latter effect would make the effects of consumption behavior sufficiently central on a minimal account.

3.2 The Centrality of Autonomy Violation Brand-related Mental State Formation

Although it is obvious that branding influences conscious thoughts, it is presently very hard to determine the effects of autonomy violating branding. There is even hardly any evidence on mental state formation brought about by branding in general (that is not related to sales or brand awareness). Hence, the effects of branding on personality or value change are still largely uncharted territory (the reason being of course that from a marketing perspective such effects are not relevant). The exception to this state of affairs is a recent study by Agnes Nairn and Pierre Berthon.⁵² They measured the effects of two types of advertisements on participant's scores on the so called Romantic-Classical personality index, which has been specially developed for consumer research. Its questionnaire positions subjects on a scale ranging from romantic (e.g. emotional, spontaneous, impractical) to classic (e.g. rational, orderly, restrained). For the purpose of the experiment, subjects were divided into three groups. One group saw an advertisement for a vacation that used images of classicist features, another group saw the same advertisement with images of romantic features and a control group was not exposed to any advertising. After exposure to the advertising (if there was any for a group) participants completed the personality questionnaire, which – once analyzed –

showed that those who had watched the romantic advertisement scored significantly higher towards the romantic side of the spectrum than the other two groups. If so, then these subjects may also have engaged in more romantic (e.g. spontaneous) thinking styles (as well as romantic behavior of course, but such effects are discussed later on in this section). However, it is unclear from this study how lasting these effects were and it is moreover unclear whether the process that brought about these mental states violated autonomy.⁵³

With regard to the effect of mental states that result from autonomy violating branding on behavior, there is of course a plethora of research on purchasing behavior which was reviewed in section 2.2. The effects of these behaviors were already discussed in section 3.1 and must in the present case be counted as sufficiently central.⁵⁴ A different type of behavioral effect of attitude change is extra-purchase behaviors. In a fascinating set of experiments, Gráinne Fitzsimons and colleagues showed that brands can unconsciously activate brand attitude structures that in turn activate goal pursuit.⁵⁵ In one study, one group of subjects was primed with a subliminal image of Apple, which in a pretest was found to be associated with creativity, while another group was subliminally primed with an image of IBM, which did not show any such association. In a follow up 'unusual uses test', participants had to think of as many uses of a brick as possible. In terms of both the number of uses and the creativity of these uses (as judged by independent raters) those who had been primed with Apple gave significantly more creative responses. Moreover, this effect increased in strength when the task followed the priming effort by a five minute delay. Because it is typical of goal pursuit that the delay of goal satisfaction increases motivation, this is strong evidence for thinking that goal pursuit is the underlying mechanism. As subjects had no awareness of the prime, the process operates outside of awareness and hence cannot be easily corrected.

In a second study, one group filled in a questionnaire that included, as a priming measure, questions about Disney (which in a pretest was associated with honesty) while another group filled in the same questionnaire with questions about E! Channel (which was not associated with honesty). It was hypothesized that on a questionnaire that presents subjects with scenarios in which they were to choose between acting honestly and acting in a socially desirable way, those motivated to be honest would more often admit to acting in socially desirable manners. As an extra manipulation, the experimenters added for one subgroup of Disney primed subjects a question that implied that they were already honest persons (and so induced the belief that the goal to be honest was satisfied) and for another subgroup a question that implied that they were striving to become honest. If the priming effects related to Disney (of which subjects were not aware) was mediated by goal motivation, then only participants who did not believe that their goal to be honest was satisfied should show the enhanced honesty effect, and that was what the researchers found.

Because these two studies suggest that brands can activate goals unconsciously, there are grounds for thinking that implicit attitudes are involved (although the relation between implicit attitudes and unconscious goal priming are not well understood presently). If so, then the effects of autonomy violating brand attitude formation reach beyond the domain of shopping into the domain of private interactions, where honesty and creativity are important regulatory goal states. In terms of the goal hierarchy discussed in chapter 2.4 these goals are moreover located in the top of the hierarchy (as 'be goals') which makes them all the more central.

4 The Retrievability of Brand Managerial Intentions

From the argument in chapter 3 it follows that there are pressures on brand managers to knowingly use messages that undermine the autonomy of consumers. That is, it was argued that there are structural features (of norms, the economy and the mind) that favor the selection of brand managers who devise messages that bypass conflict perception mechanisms and awareness. Strictly speaking, it does not follow from the fact that brand managers with such behaviors are selected that they must have the intention to act in such ways. However, it seems reasonable to assume that – all things being equal – members of an organization who know what they are doing will be more effective at what they are doing.

One might object to this argument that it disregards ethical considerations on the part of managers. It could be that there is a professional ethic that holds brand managers back from engaging in policies that they know will result in manipulation. Sadly, there is evidence to suggest that nothing of the sort is the case. A study into the ethical standards of business school students found that over the period from 1981 to 1987 on average about 50% of students indicated that they were willing to advertise a product as being “new and improved” when they knew that it was not true. A similar share of students indicated the willingness to mention on a shampoo bottle that two applications are recommended, after having learned that one application is “effective”.⁵⁶ Maybe the business school on which this study was conducted was a hotbed of unethical students, and maybe the early 1980s were a period in which a temporary ethical vacuum emerged. But that is not very likely. For one thing, the trend for unethical responses on both questions is upwards, so that students became *less* concerned with ethical standards in advertising as the 1980s progressed, not more concerned.⁵⁷ Furthermore, ethical standards can be assumed to be higher for students in their early 20s than for people who have entered the power struggle within organizations. When faced with the realities of making a living, feeding a family and paying off loans, people can be assumed to be less strict with regard to their ethical standards than students who imagine being employed in a firm.

If most brand managers indeed know that some of their messages are processed in a way that defies the recognition of conflict or intentions, then one would expect that such intentions will be readily retrievable. Unfortunately, these intentions have hardly been researched systematically in sociology, barring a recent project by Gergely Nyilasy. Because I deem it unwise to complement this research with lost quotes and self-promoting interviews from the professional advertising press, I will rely on documents from the archives of the Dutch beverage companies Amstel Beer and Van Nelle (the records of which are up to the early 1970s publically accessible). Drawing on both types of sources (i.e. sociology and archives) I will detail the extent to which there is evidence for intentions to violate authenticity and the more encompassing intention to manipulate. To repeat, the intention to violate authenticity only requires that an agent has some awareness that the means by which she wields influence violate autonomy (4.1), while the intention to violate self-control requires moreover the intention to cause a behavior or attitude change in a controllee by means of the influence attempt that is known to violate autonomy (4.2).

4.1 Managerial Knowledge about the Autonomy Violation Involved in Using Persuasion Techniques in Branding

With regard to intentional authenticity violation of consumer actions I can be brief. The effects of music, mimicry and smell are known not to cause awareness in consumers, and retail managers employing these techniques are therefore knowingly subverting authenticity. With regard to attitude change matters are more complicated. Although brand managers intentionally devise messages that induce negative affect, it is highly unlikely that they will know that a possible persuasive effect is due to introjection. But deliberate attempts to bring about evaluative conditioning must involve at the very least knowledge about the lack of deliberation involved when consumers process paired stimuli. One way to find out whether brand managers do indeed have such knowledge is to simply ask them whether this is the case.

Systematic interviews reveal that most brand managers ascribe to the view that advertising works first and foremost because of appeals to ‘emotions’ and only secondarily because of appeals to ‘rationality’.⁵⁸ But it is not clear what they mean when they talk about emotions. Because there are hardly any tools to measure the impact of emotions, creatives can insist that making advertisements is an artful skill that defies scientific scrutiny and so maintain that they have cultivated a gut level knowledge about effective emotions.⁵⁹ In his field investigation, Nyilasy was unable to find any agreement among brand managers about why emotional advertising works beyond banalities that there are categories of products that are bought more impulsively (e.g. fashion, beer, soft drinks) and products whose purchase is more carefully considered (such as cars).⁶⁰ Surveys and systematic interviews moreover consistently demonstrate that brand managers do not keep track of the academic literature on marketing.⁶¹

Given the present stage of sociological research into the motivations of brand managers, the most effective way to find out to what extent advertising creatives or managers know about the psychological mechanisms by which their messages have an effect is to investigate in detail the historical records of companies. Here one finds reports from creatives of advertising agencies explaining their proposed campaigns to management. One also finds notes of discussions of the board of directors on their reasons for accepting or rejecting proposed campaigns. Strictly speaking, evidence of knowledge about the autonomy violating nature of advertising messages from one of these two sources (i.e. production and endorsement) would suffice for saying that the messages were intentionally autonomy violating.⁶² For present purposes I will briefly discuss fragmentary evidence from the archives of the companies Van Nelle and Amstel, from the period 1950 to 1970, because these snippets provide the most insightful traces of what goes on in the minds of advertisers that are currently available.

Evidence of intentions of workers in advertising agencies is best preserved in the form of reports that accompany campaign proposals. These offer suggestive evidence for the idea that advertising creatives gave a lot of thought to the associations they established with their messages. One campaign that is well documented in the Van Nelle archive is the one for Supra coffee, which was presented in what was the company’s biggest promotional campaign until then – the year 1962 – as a new stage in the history of coffee due to the vacuum enclosed package. This emphasis on novelty was the result of one of Van Nelle’s advertising agencies’ (named Interad) strategic considerations that relied heavily on the Unique Selling Proposition (USP) theory developed by Rosser Reeves. Its core idea was that in order to sell a product it is best to be able to mention one characteristic of the product that no other product has. Interad considered three candidate propositions and had them tested on house-

wives. The first was the vacuum aspect – but that was dismissed, as nobody was supposed to buy a product because of a package, and on top of that they feared the negative association of “vacuous”. The second possible USP – the fact that *supra* coffee was freshly grinded – was also suspect, because “unconsciously” the housewives were expected to associate this aspect with the fresh grinding they still did themselves on coffee-grinders that they had so patiently acquired by collecting points on Van Nelle packages. In other words, the risk was that housewives would feel to “voluntarily abolish something they collected with great efforts”. This selling proposition was therefore to be “treated carefully”.⁶³ The final and best proposition was, much to the surprise of the advertisers, the aforementioned novelty. After all was said and done, the campaign was to encompass all three aspects, but to emphasize the last one with the main slogan “An entirely new coffee”. It also included the suggestion of high quality which was deemed “impossible to check” except by buying the product and so gave “ample opportunity to mold the women”.⁶⁴

The other campaign for which there are more extensive snippets was for tobacco. In 1970, Van Nelle’s advertising agency Van Alfen informed the head of promotion that it had thought of a new slogan for the promotion of Van Nelle medium tobacco. As a variation on the full company name “The widow of Van Nelle” the new slogan was to be “the daughter of the widow of Van Nelle”. The background for this proposal was that at the time Van Nelle dominated the market for heavy tobacco, which had given it a tuff image that held back sales in medium tobacco, especially to young people. But, as Van Alfen’s account manager was careful to observe, the company had to avoid the risk of gaining market share in the medium tobacco market by hurting its share in the more precious heavy tobacco market. In this context he pointed out that there was something “magical” about the “tension” between the words “heavy” and “widow”, which his agency did not understand, but which should not be interfered with by means of the new slogan.⁶⁵ To this end, he had formulated a range of questions that were subsequently investigated by the market research agency IPM later that year. At its core, the research conducted aimed to establish the consistency of the proposed slogan with the existing Van Nelle branding efforts. It was therefore deemed crucial to discover the estimated age of the widow of Van Nelle, in order to see whether it would be plausible to assert that she had a daughter. What was more, two proto-advertisings (developed by Van Alfen) were shown in combination with the word “medium tobacco” (while the name “daughter of the widow Van Nelle” was covered), after which the responses given by the subjects in a context of free association were matched to target reactions. It turned out that the subjects did swallow the concept of a daughter of the widow of Van Nelle as planned, and that those who already smoked Van Nelle’s heavy tobacco did not disapprove of the family extension, although they did not ponder trying it (which was good, as heavy tobacco smokers were deemed more valuable).⁶⁶

One can find a similar concern for the associations of their brand in documents from the archive of Amstel, for which there is moreover more telling evidence on the role of the directors. A report by a market research firm on the brand-image of Amstel that was submitted in 1962 observed that although Amstel was well-known with consumers (88% against 95% for its main rival Heineken) its brand-image was not good.⁶⁷ Amstel was seen as high-brow, civilized, wimpy, and fit for beginning drinkers as well as women. Worse still, it was seen also as neutral, objective and too dispassionate. Heineken on the other hand was seen as cozy, smooth, genial, spicy, sturdy and beer for the masses. When the respondents were asked to link personality types to beer-brands, Heineken was superior on all counts, from sporty types, cozy housefathers to experienced drinkers, except for one character-type: a high-brow lady giving a party.⁶⁸ These concerns subsequently were to inform Amstel’s promotion policy.

On August 30th 1963 Amstel director Kranenberg outlined what were to become the guiding principles for the years to come. The new advertising manager Avis and he had visited a talk by Ernst Dichter in Munich and “conditionally accepted” the latter’s claim that “a deeper penetration is brought about” by “appealing to unconscious behavioral patterns”. The “unconscious target” of the new policy was to “consistently foster trust in the company and its product”. What this meant in practice was that Amstel restyled its logo, used more “masculine” letters and added below the logo an illustration of a man-woman situation in which “the man must dominate”.⁶⁹ One month later the new line was presented to the board of directors. Although the company director Egberts wondered “whether it is correct to base advertising for beer on evolution and not on tradition”, the new approach was authorized.⁷⁰ This policy was carried forward in the years to come and in a 1967 report by the advertising agency FHV we read that these ideas were firmly adopted for the campaign around the slogan “This is the man, this is his beer” (the leading idea of which was that the male consumer of Amstel needed to have his beer at six o’clock, and that his wife needed to take care that he would indeed have it at six o’clock).⁷¹ The campaign also included an action in which beer corks could be sent to Amstel for a 25% reduction on “manly” tools, such as pocket-knives, fishing sets and even a Honda 600.⁷²

I take it then that there is suggestive evidence from the snippets of these two company archives, together with field interviews, for thinking that brand managers are well aware that they use techniques that rely on attaching their brand to associations in the mind of consumers and that the nature of such associations is emotional and largely unconscious. If so, then they may intentionally persuade consumers with messages they know to have effects that the consumer is unable to perceive, let alone to reflect upon in case of conflict.

4.2 Managerial Intentions to Influence Behavior by Means of Autonomy Violating Techniques

So far I have argued that there is suggestive empirical evidence for the theory-driven expectation that advertisers deliberately use evaluative conditioning techniques and have some understanding of these techniques operating in a way that violates autonomy. If such evidence were sufficiently strong, it would prove that intentional *authenticity* violation occurs in branding. However, in order to intentionally violate *self-control*, advertisers must also be shown to have the goal of bringing about a certain behavior on the part of the consumer.

If it is true that positive attitudes towards a brand that are brought about by misattribution EC lead the consumer to purchase that brand, then it is uncontroversial to suppose that brand managers want to bring about the behavior in question. Increasing sales, after all, is what they are supposed to do and what they tell others they are doing (although there are of course different types of marketing campaigns, some of which merely want to raise awareness for a product). To sum up, with regard to authenticity violation unconscious influence can be believed to be a byproduct, but with regard to self-control the unconscious influence must be intended to bring about a certain behavior. However, because brand managers are single-mindedly focused on causing sales, this distinction does not make much of a difference in the present context.

5 Consumer Consent to Covert Brand Influence

If my arguments so far are correct, then brand managers violate the autonomy of consumers with regard to actions and attitudes in a way that is both central and retrievable. However, in order to establish whether the liberal state should intervene to stop brand managers from doing so we must know whether consumers are able to give appropriate consent. Or if this would not yet be the case, whether conditions can be conceived of in which such consent is possible. In chapter 2.4 I distinguished three levels at which consent to an autonomy undermining practice can be given – that of the message, that of the setting (in which people can expect to receive a specific type of message) and that of society at large (in which messages of the specified type are common) – and argued that people secure their autonomy by giving consent that is either tacit (5.1) or explicit (5.2).

A complication with regard to branding is that it includes a number of practices with distinct consent contexts. That is, types of branding differ in the extent to which it is clear that a message is intended to be persuasive and the extent to which a set of messages is confined to a delineated setting. For present purposes we must distinguish at least six types of branding: explicit and covert interpersonal influence in shops, explicit interpersonal influence at home (door-to-door salesmen and direct marketing), covert interpersonal influence in extra-shop and extra-domestic environments, product placements (in movies and games), advertising in delineated slots (on tv, on radio, in print and on the internet) and outdoor advertising (including billboards, sponsorship and guerilla marketing). Let me repeat that I am concerned here solely with messages that occur in these branding contexts insofar as they violate autonomy.

5.1 Tacit Consent to Autonomy Violation in Branding

With regard to consent at the level of the individual message and settings in which messages occur, we noted that tacit consent cannot legitimize autonomy violation if such violation is central to the influenced person. The reason was that assuming that people tacitly consent to a practice that violates their autonomy becomes too risky if the consequences of the autonomy violation become too serious. In the absence of objective indicators of tacit consent, all autonomy undermining practices can be justified on this basis and that seems wrong (at the very least for manipulations that have a central impact). That is, when entering a shop, switching on the television or radio, entering a cinema or starting up an internet browser, consumers can be argued to give implicit consent to the manipulation that occurs via these channels. But it can also be argued that they do not. In the absence of objective criteria for thinking that they do, we are best advised to play safe with an eye to the substantial incremental effects of these messages, and so to require explicit consent.

Tacit consent at the level of society is more problematic still. It can be argued that by taking part in a market economy we tacitly consent to a number of implicit commitments that are a necessary part of it. If branding (including its autonomy violating elements) is a necessary part of a market economy, then we can be said to tacitly consent to autonomy violating branding upon becoming members of market economies. This argument fails however because branding is not a necessary part of market economies either historically or in terms of the size of its contribution (as I will show in chapter 5). If that is correct, then there is no pressure to tacitly consent to branding that is derivative of pressure to consent to market economies.

5.2 Explicit Consent to Autonomy Violation in Branding

Because tacit consent to branding is insufficient, we must investigate whether explicit consent will do. More specifically, we must ask both whether adequate consent is already given and, if this is not the case, whether it is a realistic possibility.

With regard to individual messages it can be argued that in the case of overt messages consumers can decide for themselves whether they are willing to be exposed to branding or not. This may be more difficult for product placement and some types of internet advertising, because in these cases messages cannot be avoided individually (one does not know when product placements will figure in a movie or when an advertisement will pop up on a web page). But we can certainly decline a sales pitch, turn a newspaper page when our eyes slide over an advertisement, and switch to a different channel when a commercial break interrupts a television program. That is, in these cases we can know more or less when advertisements are coming, we can recognize them because they are clearly demarcated as such, and we can avoid them. However, for explicit consent it is moreover necessary that people produce some public representation that unambiguously signifies that they consent to an autonomy violating practice. Not only is this not yet the case, it is also not realistic that *individual* branded messages will be subjected to explicit consent, given that the typical consumer in industrialized societies is estimated to be exposed to tens of thousands of messages a year.⁷³

More realistic is explicit consent at the level of *settings* in which autonomy violating messages can be expected to occur. Because what is worrisome about branding is not attitude change brought about by individual branded messages, but rather their incremental effect, the object of consent would also have to be this incremental effect. For this reason, consent at the moment of switching on a mass media device is not adequate. Instead, consent would have to be required when engaging in a cable television contract, an internet contract or when buying a radio – for these are the moments at which deliberation about long-term effects is realistically conceivable. However, a difficulty for such a consent procedure is that it is impossible for the consumer to know which value induction by which methods she will be consenting to. That is, because of the dynamics of fashion trends, the rate of product innovation, the wear-out of persuasion techniques, changes in demographics and shifts in popular culture, brand managers have to constantly adapt the content of their messages to retain consumers or to attract new ones. As a consequence, the themes and persuasion techniques shift so rapidly that the consumer cannot hope to know the manipulative intentions behind the hundreds of persuasive messages she is confronted with every day. That is, she does not know which values manipulators will target, nor does she know the direction in which her values will be changed. She knows only *that* her values will be changed in whatever way brand managers deem most prudent in order to gain or retain market share. In other words, what must be required of the consumer when she signs a cable television contract is that she give *carte blanche consent*.

I noted in chapter 2.4 that there is serious disagreement about whether explicit consent can justify central autonomy violation. On the present-autonomy reading it is possible to introduce consent conditions that allow consumers to give appropriate consent to branding influence, while the balanced-autonomy interpretation rules out this possibility. Which interpretation is the correct one is – as I noted earlier – a matter that would require more thorough analysis than I can hope to give in this thesis. In what follows I will therefore work out the implications of both readings.