

Mental Rumination: How Unwanted and Recurrent Thoughts Can Perturbate the Purchasing Behavior

Abstract: Martin and Tesser (1989) proposed a “rumination theory” to describe an unintentional and recurrent cognitive process where the individuals dwell on recurrent negative thoughts despite the absence of immediate environmental cueing. Their motivational approach presents rumination as a counterproductive thinking process triggered by the detection of a perturbation in one’s goal attainment process. This theory has received substantial attention in clinical psychology, but has not been documented in the literature on consumer behavior. Therefore, this paper aims first at synthesizing the current body of research on rumination and second at suggesting directions for research in marketing.

Key words: rumination, consumer behavior, decision making process

Rumination is a set of long-lasting, recurrent, unwanted, and counter productive thoughts. In clinical psychology, rumination is often mentioned as a consequence of post-traumatic events (Horowitz, 1976) or as an antecedent of depressive disorders (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1996). Martin and Tesser (1989, 1996, 2006) endorse a general view of rumination, removing it from its clinical context. Whereas individuals have many occasions to ruminate in their consumer's life, especially during their purchase decision process, ruminative thoughts have never been integrated into consumer behavior paradigm. Based on Martin and Tesser's motivational approach, we will first present rumination, then suggest some avenues for future research.

What is rumination?

In Martin and Tesser's model, rumination refers to thoughts '*that recur in the absence of immediate environmental demands requiring the thoughts*' (Martin and Tesser, 1996, p.1).

Rumination differs from other thinking processes because:

- It does not only occur once: what is central to rumination is not the content or any other quality of the involved mental activity but the circularity of the process.
- If some situations favor their apparition, ruminative thoughts are unintentional insofar as they revolve in the absence of immediate environmental cueing (Koole *et al.*, 1999).

Put differently, rumination is intrusive, anchored into a temporal dimension, and differs from other thinking processes which often deal with wanted tradeoffs.

Martin and Tesser's theory is based on one core principle: people's thoughts are always goal-directed. People continually compare their desired goal to their current states to regulate their behaviors. When a lack of progress towards the goal is perceived, ruminative thoughts are likely to appear (Martin and Tesser, 1996; Scott and McIntosh, 1999). In theory, each

interrupted goal can initiate rumination (e.g. to do well on one's life / to buy a muffin), but the centrality of the goal in the individual's life defines the duration and the frequency of ruminative thoughts. In Martin and Tesser's model, emotions can not be considered as antecedents of rumination but as signals which inform the individuals that a major goal is threatened. The failure in problem solving strategies (instrumental thoughts) initiates ruminative thoughts and the emotions that go with them (affective thoughts).

Rumination is divided into 3 dimensions: the emotional valence of the thoughts (negative vs. positive), their temporal orientation (past, present or future) and the polarisation of thoughts (discrepancy focus vs. attainment focus, i.e., definitively non-attained goal vs. lack of progress towards the goal).

Given the intrusion of these recurrent thoughts into consciousness, rumination leads to an important consumption of cognitive resources (Martin and Tesser, 1989) and more specifically to :

- Increases in the intensity and duration of emotions (Martin and Tesser, 1989 ; Rusting and Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998);
- Lower cognitive performances (Scott and Mc Intosh, 1999): rumination leads to less awareness and less ability to solve problems (Sukhodolsky, Golub and Cromwell, 2001) and is followed by reduced self-confidence;
- Negatively biased judgments which alter individuals' choices and make them a) see problems more threatening than they actually are or b) overemphasize negative information related to their experience (Lyubomirsky *et al.*, 1999);
- A need for more temporal resources in decision making situations (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000)

Ruminative thoughts in consumer behavior

We believe that rumination theory offers great potential for the study of consumer behavior, and is particularly relevant to better understand perturbations in the decision making process because:

- Consumption is a goal-oriented activity which leads to problem-solving situations (related to information search on products and/or brands, to prices and promotion, *etc.*)
- Rumination may arise at two different stages of the purchasing decision process. At the pre-purchase stage, we suggest that rumination is likely to occur when consumers have difficulties to solve the problem they confront (e.g., being unable to choose an Internet provider, fearing the risk of a wrong choice). At the post-purchase stage, rumination may occur when the decision produces undesirable outcomes (e.g., regretting to have subscribed to a non user-friendly Internet service).

The central role played by goals and the temporal dimension of rumination (e.g., pre-choice, post-choice) presents a significant advantage to understand the perturbations which can occur during consumers' purchase process. In that framework, rumination may play two main roles in the decision making process. Rumination may interact with other variables and moderate some consequences of consumers' decision making process. It could also be a mediator: rumination could have a direct influence on some emotional states or behaviors. This effect however would occur only and to the extent that rumination takes place. Because it considerably affects consumers' cognition and affect, rumination could foster unexpected and/or exacerbated behaviors (e.g., revenge; systematic choice deferral; systematic removal of brands from the consideration set of alternatives...). It also allows for the adoption of a

different point of view on classical relationships between consumer behavior variables (e.g., satisfaction and repurchase, for example when consumers favor simplified choice reasoning).

In previous research on rumination, data are typically based on self reports using questionnaires or on manipulations designed to influence individual's thoughts and/or to put them into situations in which higher order goals could be frustrated. We could devise qualitative works and experiments adapted to the context of consumption behavior that would address the following questions: which (unhappy) consumption episodes instigate rumination? To what extent can marketing actions trigger rumination? Will every frustrated consumption goals initiate rumination or only specific high order consumption goals (related to the self, or high involvement product categories)? What is positive rumination (to date there is no research about positive rumination), when does it occur, does it improve one's image and does it also imply counterintuitive implications (e.g., negative effects, such as choice deferral because consumers do not want the positive thoughts to end...)? At which stage of the purchase process is rumination more likely to occur? How can we prevent consumers from engaging into a rumination process? How can we help companies to reduce the likelihood that their products and/or services (sorting them by categories) will trigger ruminative thoughts? Eventually, are some consumers more likely to ruminate than others?

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