

Intuitive Advertising

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Abstract

Consumers decisions are mostly intuitive, but when their choices and preferences are challenged or questioned in any way, consumers will tend to defend decisions by rationalizing what were from the beginning quick intuitive choices. However, advertisers insist on following 20th Century models of consumer behavior, which were based on the logic of consumption, thereby wasting billions of dollars trying to argue against feelings. Marketers should aim instead at triggering quick decision-making up front, using rational criteria only to support otherwise intuitive choices, if deemed necessary, to help customers justify their preferences post-facto, rather than focusing on logic first. This paradigm shift might be the key to future marketing communications success.

Keywords: Brand Appeal, Intuition, Consumer Preference, Logic, Rationalization, Paradigm

1. Introduction

This paper derives from a conference presentation at the Northeast Decisions Sciences Institute (NEDSI) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and makes the case for intuitive, instead of rational, advertising, striking at the heart of the central and peripheral route theory of Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann (1983), which proposes that high-involvement purchases will react better to argumentative advertising, while choosing staples will respond to a more symbolic means of communication, and most especially, this paper goes against common business practice; it is a call for rectification [1]. Our message: Persuasion over argumentation, cues and symbols over words.

According to Kahneman (2003, 2011), even our most important decisions in life are intuitive, if not emotional, while Simon (1987) would have added that consumer choice tends to be pre-established, but rationalized when questioned, a process he called “satisficing [2-4].” Despite clear findings that support a less than rational consumer decision process, Casais and Pereira (2021) point out that the 20th Century model of consumption logic continues to dominate advertising models in the 21st Century [5]. According to Statista (Navarro, 2023), close to \$800 billion are being spent annually on price-based promotions; indeed, advertising is still very much attribute-based (Khanna, 2016) [6,7]. Our own monitoring of TV ads between 2024 and 2025, measured

rationality dominating 70.77% of the spots.

Advertisers would do a better job at grabbing the attention of their target audiences up front if they tickled their intuition and supported their messages with rational criteria, if at all, to help consumers justify their preferences, instead of doing it the other way around, coming in hard with discounts and otherwise rational offers. Vargo & Lusch (2004) would include this shift in paradigms in the new evolving logic of Marketing [8].

Quevedo & Gopalakrishna (2020) found that consumer decisions are based on a combination of rational, intuitive, social, sensory, and emotional criteria, not to mention social references, pursuing Dalgic & Unal’s (1971) suggestion that deciphering the mystery created by the consumer’s thought-processes and perceptions, “the black box,” as it applies to different consumption scenarios, would be fundamental to defining and executing more effective marketing strategies [9,10]. The rational bias might be too costly, and misguided. Marketers may be failing to properly appeal to their target audiences, by focusing on logical arguments, which may be based on the wrong set of criteria.

2. Review of the Literature

MacLean (1973) found that intuition is at the heart of our most primeval thought processes [11]. Indeed, intuitive thinking is more

common, it is a quick and agile process says Kahneman (2011), while reasoning is slower [3]. Donohew, Dhoundiyal, & Cook (1988) state that intuition acts as the brain's attention gatekeeper, making attention selective, and perception highly intuitive [12]. Accordingly, to reach the rational-processing brain, stimuli like advertising cues and messages must get through the intuitive brain, lest they are filtered out. Rationalization might be grossly overrated.

But what is intuition? Vaughan (1979) defines intuition as a way of knowing, recognizing things, a sixth sense, sort of speak, an unconscious process, most times [13]. Research by Roeser (2010) supports the idea that people follow their initial intuition (their "gut feeling," he says) in making their decisions, while Denes-Raj & Epstein (1994) found that they do so sometimes against their better judgment, suggesting, with a bit of irony, perhaps, that intuition is –in the end– "irrational [14,15]." And yet, people have intuitive feelings and opinions about almost everything, said 2003 Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman, who added that intuition supports most of our actions and decisions. Lastly, Kavalali (2015) suggests that many of our actions may have nothing to do with conscience, but with neurochemical dynamics [16].

Indeed, Eser, Isin, Bahar, & Tolon (2011) found that unconscious mental processes are major influences in people's deliberations, extending Simon's (1987) theory of bounded rationality into consumer decision-making [17]. Valente (2012) suggests that decisions are made by feeling, and that what follows is simply rationalizing [18]. West, Brockett, & Golden's (1997) study on the role of intuition in neural networks, which aimed at building a predictive model of consumer choice, rationalization was found to be a means of making sense of otherwise intuitive and emotional decisions [19]. Furthermore, Bettman, Luce, & Payne (1998) had found that consumers choose based on pre-established preferences, or "evoked sets [20]." More recently, Schley, De Langhe, & Long (2020) found that rationalization –in the end– has diminishing returns, which could suggest that intuitive decision making has –on the contrary– an increasing marginal effect, meaning that the more consumers think about a purchase, and the more money they have to do as they please, the less likely they are to be rational about it, clinging to their intuitive or emotional preference (Quevedo, 2019) [21,22].

Rationality, as a construct, has also been analyzed; Rutgers (1999) suggested that a new concept was needed [23]. Indeed, Bargh (2002) questioned to what extent people are aware and in control of whatever influences, and the reasons for, their purchasing and consumption behavior [24]. "Are consumers really rational?" has been asked repeatedly (Steven, 2006; Shugan, 2006) [25,26]. Indeed, Gobé (2007) challenged the business establishment to

consider feelings as human as rational thought, as we suggest in this paper [27].

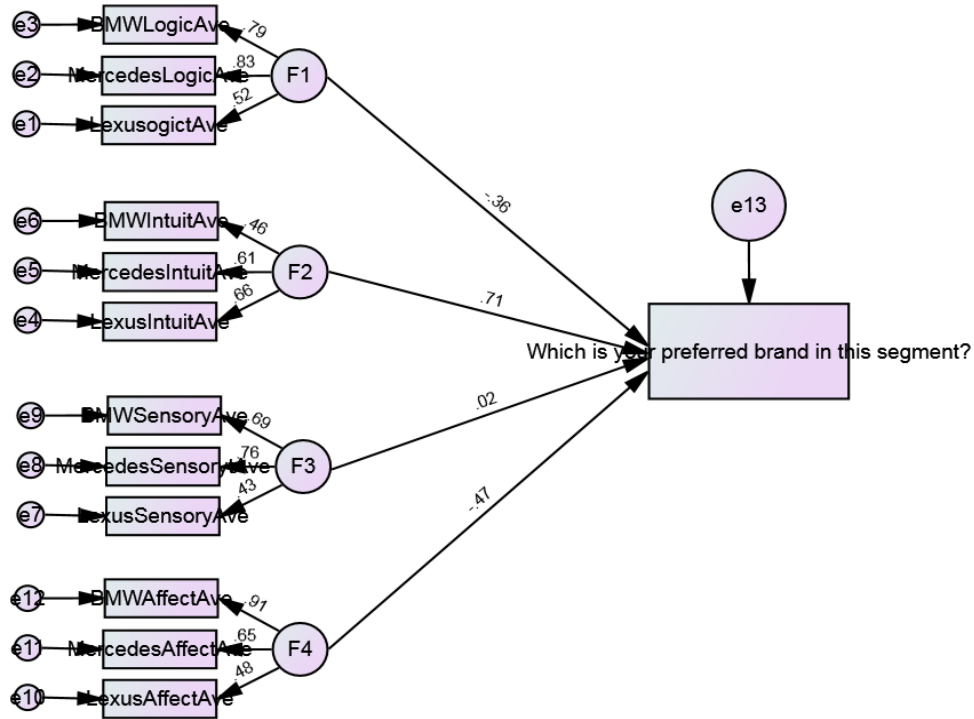
3. Our Research

We put out a national survey of more than 740 respondents, presented with close to 150 questions, using Qualtrics and Amazon Mechanical Turk to sample the American middle-class, testing how consumers establish their brand preferences by measuring the weight of rationality, intuition, sensory and emotional considerations, and then challenged their preferences with cheaper offers from the less-preferred brands, to calibrate which criteria dominated their second-thoughts and deliberations, determining through advanced SEM Path Analysis what leads to the consumers' choices, and how they defend them afterward. A combined scale was used, following Fishbein & Ajzen (1974) findings about the multidimensional nature of attitudes [28].

Two industries served to test the reliability of the scale; one would be the automobile industry, considering two extremes, popular vs. high-end brands, while the other was fast food vs. casual dining, to allow for quick thinking vs. more deliberate decision-making at each level. Well-known, most popular brands would allow subjects to express well-founded opinions; Toyota®, Hyundai® and Ford®, were used for popular cars, and BMW®, Mercedes Benz® and Lexus®, for premium vehicles. In terms of fast food, the top choices for American consumers are McDonald's®, Starbucks®, Subway®, Taco Bell®, and Chick-fil-A®. Three of these were be singled out for testing, and in the casual dining category, restaurant chains like The Olive Garden®, Chipotle®, and Applebee's® would point to high-end decisions.

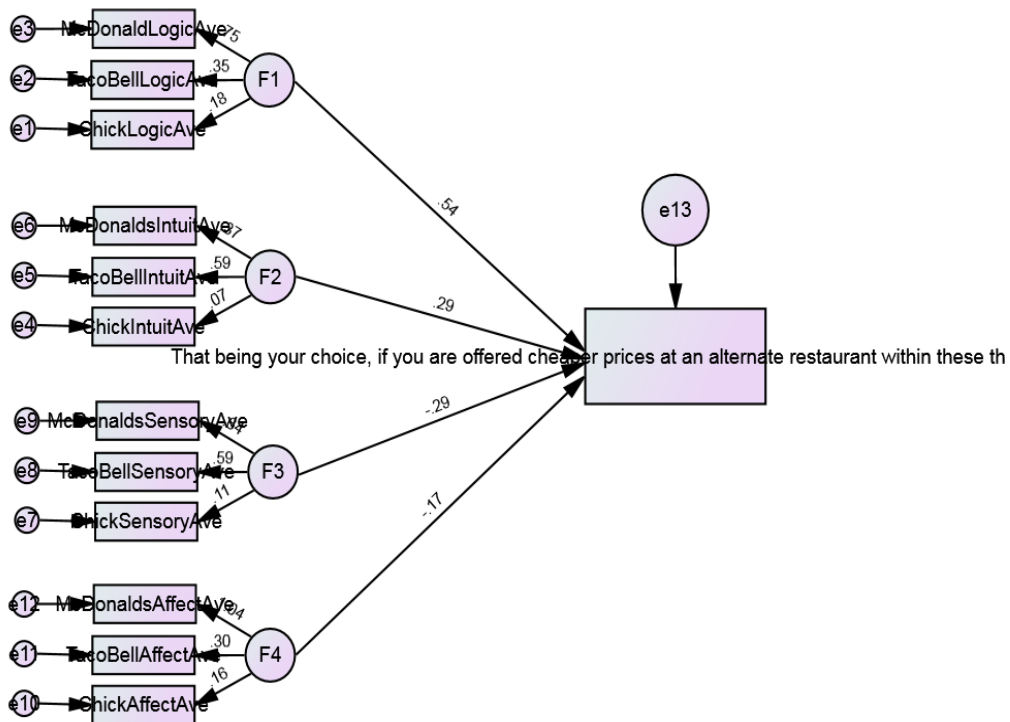
After two test runs of the survey, the final sample was presented with 12 statements per brand to separate logical, intuitive, sensory and emotional criteria, one ranking question was presented to order their preferences, and one willingness-to-switch question for each of 12 products in the four distinct categories was used as the experimental manipulation. Statistical tests proved the scale's reliability (Cronbach's Alpha from .945 to .968), and the model's significance (sig. .000).

Guided by four hypotheses, our research showed that (1st) consumer choice is guided by a combination of rational, intuitive, sensory and/or emotional criteria, with R coefficients between .736 and .762; (2nd) that emotional and intuitive appeals will have a stronger determining effect on brand preference, with R values dropping to .467 when measured separately; and (3rd) that even when considering high-ticket items, like buying a BMW®, for instance, intuitive criteria will dominate decision-making, with a regression coefficient of .71 as shown by the SEM Path Analysis graph below.



Lastly (4th), our research showed that intuitive brand preferences are rationalized when they are challenged by a competitive offer, turning a rather simple intuitive decision into a rationalized defense of the consumer's choice, with a regression coefficient of .54 as shown below.

Graph # 1: Intuition Dominates High-Involvement Decisions



Graph # 2: Rationalizing otherwise Intuitive Decisions

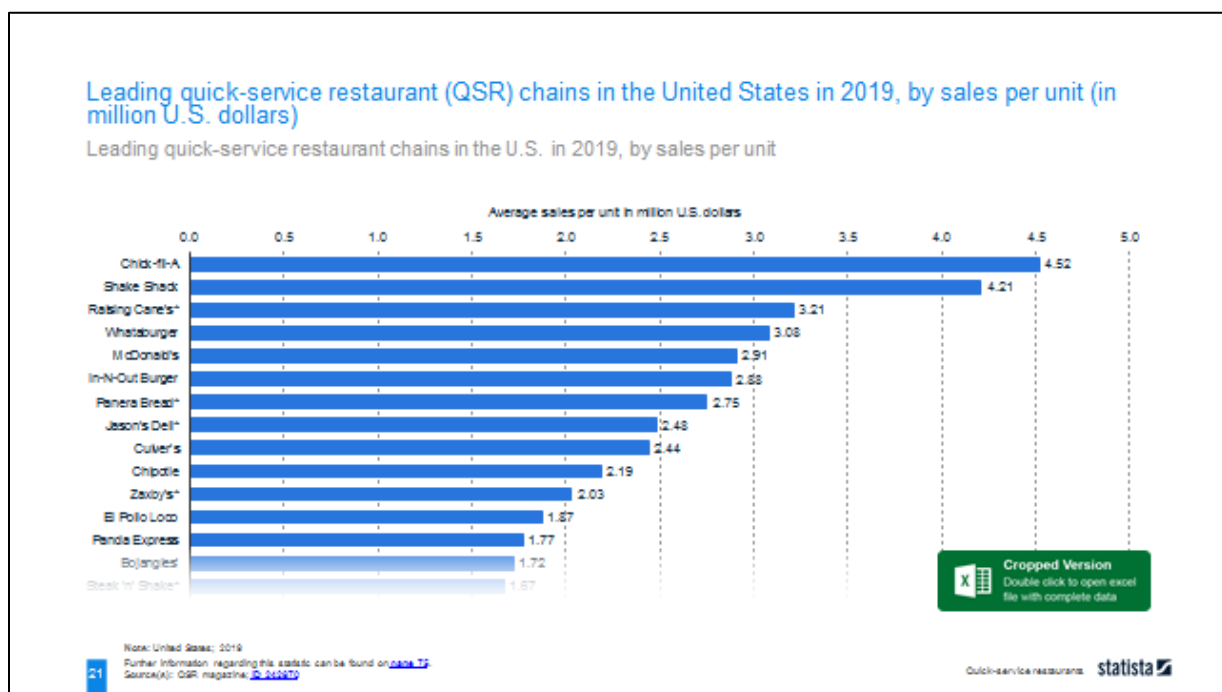
4. Discussion of Research Results

Our findings that consumer choice is guided by a combination of rational, intuitive, sensory and/or emotional criteria are consistent with the research of Zajonc & Markus (1982), Pawle & Cooper (2006), Chang & Tuan Pham (2013), Fetterman & Robinson (2013), Cian, Krishna, & Schwarz (2015), and Sweldens, Van Osselaer, & Janiszewski (2010); that emotional and intuitive appeals will have a stronger determining effect on brand preference confirms Hartman's (2018) "compelling force" theory, Danesi's (2018) "meaning of meaning" hypothesis, and confirms Bergqvist & Cowan's (2018) finding that brand choice is not reason responsive; what we found, contradicts Petty et al.'s (1983) central -periphery theory by showing that even high-involvement purchase decisions follow intuitive criteria, extending Nobel Prize winning psychological research into brand choice

decisions, confirming that brand preferences are rationalized when challenged as previously shown by Woodham, Hamilton, & Leak (2017) [1,29-38].

5. Managerial Implications

If Aaker (1996) found that brand personality can be manipulated in practice to influence brand choice, and considering the proven and determining influence of intuitive appeals in the setting of brand preferences, marketers may be missing the point when they argue the case in favor of their brands, as the rational approach may be irrelevant in determining consumer choice [39]. Offering combos for \$5, for instance, will not stem the tide of consumers that are switching from the golden arches to a chicken filet, as Bazan (2024) found, and as the graph below shows [40].

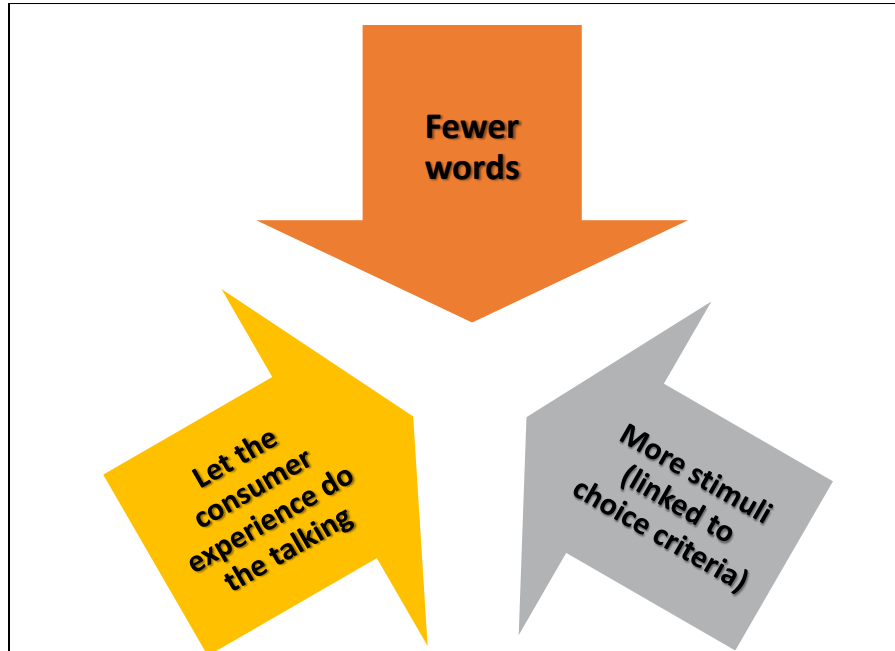


Graph # 3: Who's Winning the Fast-Food War?

The essence of our message is: if intuitive appeals matter so much, even in high-ticket purchase decisions, like purchasing a BMW®, rational advertising, based on price, in particular, will be generally ineffective. Marketers should find a way to point their messages, and their branding, a promise fulfilled, as Mullin (2006) defines it, to the brain's intuitive and very selective gatekeeper, MacLean's (1973) reptilian core, if they want to capture their consumers' attention, especially in today's day and age of fast digital marketing and intensive social media clutter, when all you have is a fraction of a second to catch the eye of your target, while they scroll on their cellphones; if consumers do "follow their nose" to make their

decisions, why argue, literally? Arguments, in any case, should be designed as support, to help consumers rationalize otherwise intuitive decisions. Advertising should be therefore intuitive, not rational [41].

As suggested in Graph # 4 below, intuitive advertising uses fewer words and more stimuli to let the audience create the message in their minds. Sometimes, 15 seconds of silence in a TV ad can be more convincing than 30 seconds of empty arguments that do not click with the audience.



Graph # 4: The Essence of Intuitive Advertising

However, Kapferer & Kapferer (2004) pointed out that to define the proper branding strategy, and to sustain it toward the long-term, brand managers must calibrate their brands, and the competition, based on a more holistic and integrated scale, that is, on a wider set of considerations that go beyond the logical price and quality, and apply an integrative approach (Srinivasan, 1987) to determine, as we suggest, how they are being viewed by their audiences and consumers based on a combination of rational, intuitive, sensory and emotional appeals [42,43]. Only then can they decide on a proper course of action. Combining ignorance with initiative can be

dangerous and costly, but ignoring the consumer is unforgivable.

Intuitive ads represent only 3.08% of our 2024-2025 TV monitor. A clear example is Chick-fil-A®, a chain of fast-food that does not open on Sundays and evidently has far fewer points of sale than McDonald's®, and yet is leading in sales per unit in the US, a fact that tends to corroborate, in "dollars and sense," our findings and proposal: Intuitive advertising is more effective. Indeed, their ads are quite simple, and are supported by a fulfilled promise in each and every restaurant.



Graph # 5: How does the Leader Advertise?

Intuitive advertising favors persuasion over argumentation. It uses more images and symbolism, less words, to allow consumers to reach their own conclusions. But beware, if a brand is a promise, branding must fulfill that promise. Advertising must be backed by effective operations, to let the customer experience do the talking (Cleff, Chun, & Walter 2014) [44].

In the casual dining sector, Chipotle® leads Applebee's® in consumer preference. As shown in Graph # 6 below, their messages are quite opposed. One contains three words, the other uses ten words, or close to 35 when you include the footnote which nobody reads. One refers to ingredients, the other points to price. And one lets you interpret “ingredients” as you wish, be it freshness, taste or whatever, while the other leaves nothing to the imagination: \$12.99, period!



Graph # 6: Intuition beats Reason

And even in the high-end automobile segment, we see the leader pursue intuition, whereas in the popular cars segment, advertisers emphasize monthly leasing costs as their main argument. When

making the more important decisions, such as buying a BMW®, the senses, emotions and intuition, not reason, seem to be the driving force (pun intended), as shown on Graph # 7 below.



INSPIRING DESIGNS DON'T ALWAYS START ON PAPER.

It started as a competition among our teams of designers. In the end, the all-new 5 Series emerged looking like an animal ready to pounce. The cohesive rhythm of flame-like lines begins on the hood, flaring at the eight-speed automatic transmission awaiting your command. These lines continue along the wheelbase, which is the longest of its class, and then into the cabin where a world of innovations perfectly complements the 5 Series experience we've ever created.

Graph # 7: Appealing to the Senses

Below is another example of a wordless ad that says it all. It plays with the audience's imagination, and allows consumers to reach their own conclusions.



Graph # 8: When words aren't necessary

6. Limitations and Further Research

Surely, when all you have is five bucks to get a meal, a \$5 combo sounds most reasonable. Although we evaluated fast-food, casual dining, popular cars, and high-end vehicle purchases, not all consumer scenarios will necessarily follow the same criteria. Therefore, we propose to extend the RISE scale to include another “S” for social references, weighing the moderating effect of income and budget, and measuring the mediating effect of advertising on brand preferences, reaching into other product scenarios.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

\$800 billion dollars are being wasted in rational advertising. Advertisers may be missing their targets by appealing to logic when their audiences follow their feelings to make their decisions, and worse yet, when they have only a fraction of a second to decide, intuitively, what post to read and which influencer to pay attention to on social media (Kusumasondjaja, 2018) [45]. Emotional appeals may work (Lee, 2019), but the mind will tend to override the thought process (McMillan, 2014) [46]. Indeed, Batoni (2015), a psychiatrist, separates the concept of the mind from the definition of the brain [47]. He says that the brain is a neurological system, and the mind, a system of meanings and interpretations. Clues matter more than words in today’s advertising landscape (Sengupta, Goodstein, & Boninger, 1997) [48].

If intuition is so prevalent in consumer choice, if consumers are so intuitive in making decisions, why argue? Advertisers should try to

say it all without saying anything. Use more cues than arguments. Let that black box in the audience’s mind do the work.

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