

Editorial

Introduction to research dialogue

During the late 1970's, social psychologists' adoption of the information processing paradigm (Lachman, Lachman, & Butterfield, 1979) gave rise to a theoretical orientation that became known as *social cognition* (for the earliest comprehensive treatment see Wyer & Carlston, 1979). In the three decades since, the social cognition approach became the dominant theoretical framework in social as well as consumer psychology. Along the way, social cognition researchers overcame some of the blind spots associated with an early emphasis on "cold" cognition and individuals as isolated information processors (for a discussion see Schwarz, 2000) by broadening the scope of inquiry to include affect, motivation, and social interaction.

In this Research Dialogue, Wyer, Hung, and Jiang (2008a) draw attention to another blind spot that has long characterized social cognition research, namely an almost exclusive focus on the processing of information presented in a verbal format. The limitations of this focus are particularly apparent in the consumer domain, where verbal product information is typically accompanied by a variety of images. Drawing on what has been learned about the processing of verbal and visual information in separate research streams, Wyer and colleagues propose a framework for conceptualizing the combined effects of information presented in both modalities. Their experimental findings highlight that the joint presentation of verbal and visual information can facilitate as well as impair processing, depending on the interplay of individual differences in processing strategy, situational influences, and task characteristics. Their conceptual framework opens new avenues for future research with important applied implications for the design of advertisements.

In a far reaching commentary, Bagozzi (2008) discusses the conceptualization offered by Wyer and colleagues and raises new questions about the role of visual and verbal processing strategies in persuasion, goal striving and other domains. He also takes issue with the Style of Processing Scale (Childers, Houston, & Heckler, 1985) used in many of the reviewed studies. Complementing the review of Wyer et al. (2008a), Childers and Jiang (2008) offer a neurobiological perspective on visual and verbal processing that draws on functional brain imaging and the measurement of event related potentials. Finally, Cohen, Belyavsky, and Silk (2008) illustrate the usefulness of Wyer et al.'s framework by linking it to construal

level theory (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007) to illuminate a specific consumer behavior: consumers' choices are often influenced by rebate offers, yet only some 10% of rebates are actually redeemed. Would consumers be more likely to consider the feasibility of the rebate (rather than its mere desirability) if they were prompted to imagine the steps involved in the redemption process? Their data suggest so, but only for consumers who find visualization easy to begin with. Throughout, the contributions to this Research Dialogue highlight that the costs and benefits of visual and verbal processing strategies are highly context dependent, raising challenging issues for future research.

Wyer, Jiang, and Hung's (2008b) response completes this set, which complements other Research Dialogues that brought core themes of social cognition research to bear on consumer behavior (e.g., Dijksterhuis, Smith, van Baaren, & Wigboldus, 2005; Han, Lerner, & Keltner, 2007; Schwarz, 2004; Strack, Werth, & Deutsch, 2006).

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